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TIME'S REVENGES

BY

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AUTHOR OF

'JOSEPH'S COAT' 'VAL STRANGE' 'BOB MARTIN'S LITTLE GIRL' ETC.



IN THREE VOLUMES

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TIME'S REVENGES

CHAPTER XVII

WHEN they next came upon the lawn hardly anybody was visible. General Mallard and Denton were in conversation, the General lingering in expectation of his daughter's arrival, and Denton awaiting Hawthorne. The two young people looked more than a little conscious as they advanced; but Hawthorne, finding himself alone with the two men who of all men in the world had a right to be aware of his latest enterprise, put a bold face upon the matter.

‘General Mallard,’ he began; ‘you remember our conversation?’

‘Perfectly,’ the General answered, a light beginning already to twinkle in his eye.

‘I have spoken to Miss Mallard,’ said Hawthorne, blushing and stammering in spite of himself, ‘and she has consented. My dear old guardian’—he laid an affectionate hand upon Denton’s shoulder—‘allow me to introduce you to my promised wife.’

Denton shook hands with him with one of his old flashes of vehemence. ‘I congratulate you, my boy, with all my heart. That’s as it should be.’

He thought, naturally enough, how strange a thing it was that this news should come to him at that place and time. He thought how eagerly Barton and his wife would be interested in the news, and it could only come to them through the common talk of strangers unless he himself should carry it. The General received his prospective son-in-law with warmth. The match was undoubtedly a brilliant one so far as money was concerned, and as for the question of family that had long since been settled by some of the best people in England, who

had accepted the young millionaire on terms of perfect and unquestioned equality.

Hawthorne lost no time in drawing Denton aside, and in explaining to him what seemed his own stupidity and ingratitude.

‘I’ve only just learned from Miss Mallard,’ he said, ‘that this is the house of honest Tom Barton. I came as one of the Governor’s party, without even asking my host’s name, and I have not been introduced to him. You should have told me, Mr. Denton.’

‘My dear boy,’ Denton answered; ‘I supposed you knew, and was rather astonished at the way in which you accepted my invitation.’

‘I understand it all now,’ said Hawthorne. ‘You remember I was so struck by the seeming strangeness of Mrs. Barton’s manner that I was going to ask you if her mind was in any way affected. What she must think of me I hardly dare to fancy. You are an old friend, and you can take such a liberty as I am going to ask you to exercise. Take me

into the house, introduce me to both of them, and let me make my apologies and explanations.'

The position Denton found himself in was very awkward, and the task set upon him was one for which he had never bargained. He thought himself a fool for having taken a hand in Mrs. Barton's scheme at all, but there was no escaping from the position now. The only thing was to see that there should be no breakdown on the part of the parents, and to that end he felt it necessary to warn them.

'Wait here,' he said therefore. 'Barton's a prodigiously busy man, and the kind of thing we've had here this afternoon cuts woefully into his time. It's quite likely that he's locked up in his own room now and up to the eyes in business. Mrs. Barton, as you know, is unwell already, but I'll see if Barton can see you. I've not the slightest doubt he'd like to see you, but——'

There was so obvious an air of restraint

and awkwardness about Denton that the young man was quite at a loss to understand him. It deepened the sense of his own apparent ingratitude or awkwardness, and left him extremely ill at ease. The General had by this time conducted his daughter to their carriage and had been driven away. Every guest was gone, and the young man walked somewhat disconsolately up and down the lawn, forming in his own mind phrases of apology and explanation.

Denton was absent some time, and Hawthorne had begun to wonder whether he would be received at all, when the old gentleman reappeared, and with a most transparent imitation of unconcern, under which lay a tremulous excitement he could not subdue, invited him into the house. He found to his surprise that Mrs. Barton as well as her husband was there to receive him. She sat in a large arm-chair with her face turned from the light, but Hawthorne could see that she had not long since been weeping, and her manner

was even now, as it seemed to him, strangely disturbed. He could not think that he was the cause of all this agitation. He felt more and more awkward and embarrassed.

‘Barton,’ said the old gentleman, ‘this is Michael Hawthorne, whose life you saved when a baby, the son of your old partner, Michael Hawthorne, whose estates in Tasmania you have managed these three-and-twenty years.’

He laid a certain stress upon the words—somewhat as if he were teaching a lesson, or driving home an old one, Hawthorne thought. For a man of the world like Denton the thing was poorly and stiffly done, and there was a feeling of unreality about it which touched the observer keenly. He wondered in a vague way what it all meant, and was conscious of a dream-like feeling.

‘I am very glad to meet you, sir,’ said Barton in answer, and shaking hands, ‘I’m very glad indeed to meet you.’

His deep voice quivered, and the hand in

which Hawthorne laid his own shook with an intense though invisible vibration. Barton's face was startlingly pale, and his eyes were almost wild.

‘I am delighted to meet *you*, sir,’ Hawthorne answered. ‘I’ve a thousand things to thank you for, and I hardly know where to begin. I don’t know how to apologise to Mrs. Barton for the way in which I met her, but the fact is that I did not associate her name with that of my old benefactor and the saviour of my life.’

‘Say no more about that,’ Tom answered in a deep voice quivering more and more. ‘We’re heartily glad to see you, Mr. Hawthorne, and to make you welcome. We hope that whilst you stay in Sydney you’ll make our house your home. We should take it ill, sir, if you went elsewhere. You’ll forgive me for saying that, but I know that’s what my wife feels, and it’s what I feel.’

Was it nothing but genuine feeling? Hawthorne asked himself. Was it possible

that these good folks who had saved and cherished him when he was a mere infant, and had since then so affectionately guarded his rights, should have kept him in memory so long, and thus be moved merely by the fact of his return? It was possible, he told himself in answer, and he could think of no other solution for the puzzle their manner presented.

‘Mr. Hawthorne’s going about a great deal,’ Denton interposed somewhat too eagerly, ‘and he’ll necessarily have to receive a great many people. Don’t you think you’re putting yourself to too much trouble, Barton?’

‘I’m sure,’ said Tom in a deep, unsteady voice, ‘that I’m putting myself to no trouble that won’t be a pleasure to me. My wife joins with me, Mr. Hawthorne. We both ask you to stop under our roof so long as you are in Sydney.’

‘I should be delighted,’ Hawthorne answered.

Denton seemed, to his thinking, to enter-

tain some objection, though it might mean no more than he had just expressed. The old gentleman gave a half-perceptible hitch of his shoulders in answer, and an involuntary cast upwards of his bushy grey eyebrows. There seemed to the young man's watchful and excited mind something of a prophecy and foreboding in these slight signs.

'Denton tells me,' said Barton, 'that you're staying at the Union. I'll send a man down for your traps at once if you'll allow me, and your own man can come along with him, and you can set up here at once. There's room enough,' he added, somewhat boisterously. 'We're pretty much alone in this big place, Mr. Hawthorne. We've neither chick nor child of our own, and though we don't let out to be tired of one another, we find a little company agreeable.'

All this time Mrs. Barton had not spoken, but she said now that she thanked Mr. Hawthorne for accepting her husband's invitation.

‘We’ll do our best to make you comfortable,’ she added, faintly, and then, though she would apparently have added more, suffered her voice to die away into silence.

‘You had better come, too, Denton,’ said the master of the house, ‘and we’ll make a sort of a family party of it. Don’t say no, there’s a good fellow.’

‘Very well,’ Denton answered, with a sudden decisive snap, following on a considerable pause, ‘I’ll come.’

His manner was half sulky and half defiant, and was altogether so unlike himself that Hawthorne was more and more filled with wonder at it.

‘My wife’s a bit upset at the sight of you, Mr. Hawthorne,’ said Barton, who felt it necessary to také the bull by the horns, and to offer the best explanation he could of the evident disturbance. ‘I don’t mind confessing to the same myself. You see, sir, my wife nursed you in her arms many and many a score of times before you could walk or

talk. We've got no child of our own, and if I had my own way I should have kept you and bred you like my own child.'

Mrs. Barton had begun to cry again before Tom was half way through his speech, and Denton looked dreadfully fidgety and annoyed, walking with short steps up and down the room, and shooting now and then an angry sidelong glance at Barton from under his thick brows. But Tom was, after all, a better diplomatist than Denton was able to fancy. He had seen that his wife was on the verge of tears, and he had offered beforehand a valid excuse for them. Hawthorne was profoundly touched, and was aware of a little dimness in his own eyes.

'You are kinder even than I thought you,' he answered.

'We've remembered you, sir, all these years,' Barton went on, apparently heedless of Mary's agitation, but fully observant of it none the less, and willing that it should have full scope. 'We don't quite seem to know

you yet, for the little chap that went away was only just beginning to toddle about, and you come back a gentleman grown.'

But he had not counted on his own emotion, and found suddenly that he could go no further. Hawthorne wrung his hand heartily.

'If I had guessed, Mr. Barton,' he said, with a sincerity which carried conviction with it, 'if I had guessed that I had had two such dear and faithful friends on this side of the world, I should have been here before, believe me. I knew I had much to thank you for, but I did not know how much.'

'Say no more, sir,' said Barton, 'say no more. We are delighted to meet you here, and so long as you like to stay, you're welcome as the rose in June.'

'Aye,' said Mrs. Barton from behind her handkerchief, 'that's so.'

'Mrs. Barton's not well to-day,' said Denton. 'She's been suffering, to my knowledge, and now we're upsetting her. Let's

leave her for a little while. Come with me to the hotel, Michael, whilst I get my things packed. Then I'll go with you to the club, and we'll be back here, Barton, in time for dinner. That, I think, is the best arrangement we can make, and if I might advise, Barton, I should persuade your wife to lie down. The renewal of old associations like this is naturally moving, naturally affecting, and it would do none of us harm to compose ourselves a little.'

Denton's manner was still forced and unreal, and for some reason inexplicable to Hawthorne he was obviously in a tumult. His voice was wholly unsympathetic, a little dictatorial, and even scornful, the young man thought.

'Very well,' cried Barton, using a boisterous heartiness to cover his own feelings; 'that's understood. When you come back you'll find everything ready, and I can promise you an Australian welcome, Mr. Hawthorne.'

The young man took temporary leave and went away with Denton, whom, for the first time in his life, he found unreasonable.

‘What on earth,’ the old gentleman asked, ‘did you come out here for?’

‘Why, sir,’ said Hawthorne, smiling, ‘I thought I made that clear enough this afternoon.’

‘You could have spoken to Miss Mallard in England,’ Denton answered. ‘She’d have said “Yes” there as well as here, I suppose.’

‘I’m not sure of that, sir,’ Hawthorne responded, laughing outright. He had thoroughly recovered his self-possession by this time, and except for a certain warmth of heart excited by the unexpected cordiality of his greeting, had already forgotten the scene which had just taken place. ‘You see,’ he added, ‘we came out together; there were not many passengers, and we had ample opportunity of learning to know each other.’

Denton grunted by way of sole response, but a minute later he broke out again.

‘You ought, since you are here, to go and look at that Tasmanian property of yours. No man has a right to draw 60,000*l.* a year from a property and know nothing at all about it.’

‘I shall certainly visit the property,’ Hawthorne answered, with unabated good humour. ‘But I’m not in any especial hurry to do so just at present.’

‘You won’t find yourself at all comfortable,’ replied Denton. ‘You’ll be bored to death by those good people. You’ve nothing in the world in common with them. Tom Barton’s a good fellow, one of the best fellows I know; honest as the day and upright as a plumb-line. His wife’s a dear creature, too, best woman I ever knew, I think. But there’s nothing between you. They can’t talk your talk, they know nothing about the things you’re used to. You’ll get sick of wool and

gold, and cinnabar and silver, in a day. What in the world did you want to go there for? I spoke out as broadly as I could to save you, but you wouldn't take the hint.'

'Now, my dear old guardian,' said Hawthorne, sliding an arm round one of the old gentleman's, 'this is just as unlike you as it well can be. Here are these dear, good old people, who as you tell me are amongst the best you know—one of them nursed and loved me when I was a baby, the other saved my life, and has taken care of my interests ever since. They are moved to actual tears when they receive me. They tell me they have neither chick nor child of their own, and they have had an affectionate remembrance of me for four-and-twenty years, whilst I have hardly thought of them. And now they offer me the most cordial invitation I ever had in my life, and I'm to hurt them by refusing it. I vow to you, sir, that I wouldn't hurt them for the world. Even if I were going there to endure such a boredom as never afflicted

man before, I would do it willingly for a year.'

'Well, well,' said Denton, 'you are warned. Go your own way.'

'What would you do in such a case?' Hawthorne asked him jocularly. 'I know your bark of old, but I never felt your bite yet.'

'I wash my hands of the whole business, Michael,' said the old gentleman with a vehemence which seemed unnecessary. 'I don't accept the responsibility for it. I am going with you because perhaps I can help to keep things smooth.'

'I trust,' Hawthorne answered, still laughing, 'that things may keep themselves smooth, and that there may be no necessity for your intervention.'

'I hope there mayn't be,' responded Denton, briefly.

'But what's the mystery?' the young man asked, speaking more than half at hazard.

‘Mystery!’ cried Denton, turning round and peering sharply at him. ‘Mystery! There’s no mystery in the matter.’

Here again he seemed unnecessarily vehement, and he was wholly a puzzle to Hawthorne, who had known him all his life, and had never found him in so strange a mood before. Without in the least knowing why, he felt inwardly discomfited and ill at ease. He tried another theme, in which perhaps he thought there might lie some possibility of explanation.

‘You haven’t congratulated me yet,’ he said.

‘I do, my dear boy,’ Denton cried eagerly, ‘I do with all my heart. You ought to be a happy fellow. I think you have made an excellent choice, and that you will have a good and charming wife.’

‘That’s better,’ said Michael. ‘Now you are like yourself again.’

‘On that side, congratulation,’ said Denton,

‘and nothing but congratulation. As for the other affair, I’m afraid that you may find your enterprise a trifle dull—unless,’ he added, silently in his own mind, ‘you find it unexpectedly exciting.’

CHAPTER XVIII

DENTON and Hawthorne returned in due course to Barton's house, were inducted into their separate rooms, and at once dressed for dinner. For three of the party assembled the meal was one of the most remarkable of their lives, and Hawthorne, who alone was unaware of the extraordinary circumstances under which they met, was also alone in being at his ease. Strange and remarkable as the position was, the others little by little adapted themselves to it, and by the time dinner was over and the three men were smoking over their coffee on the lawn, affairs had grown to be at least endurable both to the elderly barrister and to Barton.

Mrs. Barton, still nervous and fluttered,

but having come through the ordeal with far greater success than her husband had dared to hope for, retired to her room for a little while. The men talked commonplaces, as was natural under the circumstances. Barton got on to the history of the mine, and told it rather clumsily, but at considerable length. Anything was better than silence just then; but though, of course, he knew every detail of the narrative, he boggled over it at times like a barrister only half acquainted with the contents of his brief. His heart was not in the story, but far elsewhere, and he told what should have been an interesting tale without interest. Somehow a certain somnolent feeling began to hover over the trio, and when the narrative was at an end nobody was disposed to speak further for the moment.

The sun was down, and since in the latitude of Sydney twilight is but brief, the darkness came on apace. The night was silent and richly perfumed, and Hawthorne at least was happy. He surely had a right to

be : he had that day won the promise of the girl he loved ; he had found these dear and unexpected friends, on whom his heart immediately fastened. He was rich in youth, in hope, in health, and in actual money, and so far as he could see there was not even a cloud upon his horizon. Sometimes he thought poorly of his money, and poorly of himself in connection with it, as any healthy and high-minded young fellow who has not yet found his way in the world would be likely to do. Money is an excellent thing, no doubt, and it is only those who find it hard to gain who appreciate its real value. But noble and high-minded men of great wealth find the burden sometimes hard to bear.

Hawthorne, viewing his own career, and wondering honestly how he could be of use in the world, surveying sad-heartedly enough the obvious fact of his own personal inutility, experienced a sadness as deep as even the most socialistic person might have desired. But for the hour at least his mind rested, his

heart was at peace, and he sat in the scented darkness watching the fiery glow of the cigars his companions smoked, and listening to the wash of the harbour waters and the faint echo of the far-off murmur of the city.

Suddenly within doors there sounded a simple air from the piano, and Denton, whose nerves had played him false all night, started at it.

‘What’s that?’ He had scarcely spoken the words when he recognised the melody of ‘Annie Laurie,’ and was ashamed of himself for having spoken.

‘That’s the missis,’ said Barton, with a manner laboriously genial. ‘She took a lesson or two when we first came to Sydney, and she always had a fancy for music. I think she might have made a player if she had taken it up in time.’ An unprejudiced observer might not have thought so, but to Tom whatever his wife might do was excellent and charming. ‘I sit out here,’ said Barton, ‘sometimes of a night, and the missis sits

down and plays inside, and I find it keeps me in company. 'It's a lot better than talking to each other. Mary,' he sang out, 'play us "The Bailiff's Daughter."'

The unseen performer checked herself in the last bar of 'Annie Laurie,' and a moment later obeyed her husband's request. The three men sat in silence listening.

'Let's go in,' said Barton, rising suddenly, when, after four or five repetitions of the simple air, the player had discontinued.

The room was quite dark, but Barton led the way with the sure foot of custom, and Denton and Hawthorne somewhat hesitatingly followed him. Hawthorne, stretching out his hand to protect himself from a chance collision, touched the outstretched hand of his mother, who, being more accustomed to the dim light than himself, saw that he was in danger of walking over her, and meant to guide him. The two hands met and touched, and Mary could not resist the impulse which assailed her. Her hand glided into that of

her child and held it. She placed a seat for him, still holding his hand, and drew him into it.

‘Sit there,’ she said, in a softly tremulous voice.

Barton was fumbling on the mantel-piece, and by-and-bye the spluttering of a match was heard.

‘Don’t light the gas, Tom,’ said his wife. ‘Let’s sit here in the dark. I like it better.’

She still held her son’s hand with a warm soft pressure, and the young fellow, ignorant of the truth of who he was, felt unusually tender to the kind motherly creature who thus welcomed him, and who had already shown so kindly a memory of his defenceless childish days. In the darkness Mary grew a little bold, and laid her free hand on Michael’s shoulder. In response to this the young man took the other hand and held it in both his own. He could not have spoken just then without some fear of breaking down, and

there was no need of speaking. For two or three minutes there was complete silence. Hawthorne had thrown his cigar away, but the others were still smoking, and the lights alternately glowed and waned, showing the tip of a nose, the gleam of an eye, a curl in Barton's beard, or an incandescent-looking hair or two in Denton's shaggy eyebrows, but no more. Hawthorne sat with one light, timid, affectionate hand upon his shoulder, and the other palpitating warm in both of his, and his heart melted at the simple kindness with which he was received. At last he cleared his throat and spoke with a little effort to keep his voice steady.

‘It's more than three-and-twenty years since I went home, Mrs. Barton—since you sent me away.’

‘Yes,’ she answered, somewhat huskily, ‘it is more than three-and-twenty years.’

‘I was talking about my childhood only this afternoon,’ he said, ‘and, of course, I knew but little of it. Won't you tell me some-

thing ; tell me about my father and mother ?
I know nothing of them.'

The simple request was terrible to all three of his hearers, and what answer could possibly have been given to it will never be known, for just at that moment a rap sounded at the door, and a domestic entered, bringing in a sudden rush of light from the illuminated hall.

'A gentleman to see Mrs. Barton with a note,' said the domestic.

Mary released her hand from Hawthorne's and accepted the note.

'Light the gas, Tom,' she said softly, and when Barton obeyed her, Hawthorne saw that her eyes were full of tears. He was more and more impressed with the tenderness of these good folks who had so long and so affectionately remembered the helpless waif with whom they had shared their own good fortune.

Mrs. Barton quite unaffectedly dried her eyes, opened the envelope which had been

handed to her, and began to read. She whispered a hasty word to her husband, offered a mere murmur of apology to her guests, and left the room. The letter she had received ran thus :—

‘DEAR MADAM,—I regret to inform you that my speculations have been more than usually unfortunate. The last instalment I owed to your generosity has entirely vanished, and I fear I shall once more be compelled to intrude myself upon your kindness. I am sorry to trouble you, but I am without other resources, and your tenderness for the memory of the late lamented emboldens me. I shall be glad if you can afford me a moment’s interview.

‘I am, dear madam,

‘With every sentiment of regret,

‘Yours most sincerely,

‘JOHN DOGDYKE.’

Mrs. Barton walked into the drawing-

room. There a single crimson-shaded lamp was burning on a side table, and the room, which was large and luxuriously furnished, was full of reposeful shadow.

‘Send Mr. Dogdyke here,’ she said to the servant as she entered the apartment.

For a moment Mr. Dogdyke stood silhouetted against the brighter light in the corridor, a small, stooping man, with a shining head which looked like polished metal in the illumination of the gas-jets behind him. The door closed and his features became dimly visible. They were thin and sanctimonious, and as he came forward with a mitching step he rubbed his hands together as if in nervous apology for his intrusion. He was attired in black, and wore a white necktie, and his clothes were clean and well brushed, though much too large for him.

‘I find you at home, madam,’ he began in a carneying voice, which bespoke hypocrisy in every note. ‘I was afraid that possibly you might have been engaged in any one of

those harmless social dissipations which——.’ There he trailed away into silence. By way of filling up the pause he rubbed his hands and writhed his face into a smile which made him, if anything, less agreeable to look at than he was before.

‘Well, Dogdyke,’ said Mrs. Barton, ‘all I have got to say is, you ought to be ashamed to come back again. You promised me last time that I should be shut of you for good and all, and here you are again in less than a quarter. What do you mean by it?’

Mr. Dogdyke rubbed his hands, which were half obscured in the cuffs of his coat, and then coughed behind one of them.

‘I beg your pardon, madam,’ he said, ‘may I crave the privilege of——.’ He trailed away into silence again, and, stooping a little more forward, hid his hands in his big coat cuffs, using them as a lady does a muff.

‘You can sit down, Dogdyke, if that’s what you mean,’ she answered.

The permission was given with pronounced ungraciousness, and Mr. Dogdyke made a sideway advance to the nearest chair and slid into it at the last moment as if he expected it to be snatched away from him and had suddenly determined to be sure of it.

‘I said, madam,’ he continued, hooking one ankle with the other and writhing either hand about his wrists, ‘that you can hardly fail to be aware of the object of my——’ He seemed to have as rooted an objection as ever to closing a phrase. But he twisted his foot and coughed behind his hand once more by way of eking out his meaning.

‘I can guess what you are here for, Dogdyke, if that is what you want me to understand,’ she answered in an impatient voice, ‘and I tell you again you ought to be ashamed of yourself.’

‘Madam,’ said Dogdyke, ‘circumstances have been unpropitious. I was, in short——’

‘I know,’ cried Mrs. Barton, taking him up sharply at the pause. ‘You need not tell

me. You have spent the last pound you squeezed out of me last time.'

'It has vanished, madam, in speculations which have proved disastrous to their projector.' His mean little eyes, which were closer to his nose than they had any moral right to be, were cast up under the veil of his sandy-grey eyebrows in gratuitous, undeceptive sanctimony and humbug. 'Providence, dear madam, has not seen fit to bless my little enterprises.'

'Providence,' said Mrs. Barton, 'Providence! When Providence begins to deal with you, John Dogdyke, you'll be sorry for it. Don't talk about Providence. Let sleeping dogs lie.'

'My little enterprises, madam, have not succeeded. My little merchant-crafts have subsided in the billows of the——'

'The what?' cried Mrs. Barton, with sudden acrimony.

'The deep, madam,' said Mr. Dogdyke.

'It would have done very little harm,'

retorted Mrs. Barton, 'if you'd subsided with them.'

'Madam,' returned Mr. Dogdyke, 'let us cultivate a spirit of——'

'For goodness sake,' cried Mrs. Barton, with uplifted hands, 'why can't the man finish what he's got to say? Cultivate a spirit of what?'

'A spirit of conciliation, madam.'

'Now don't you think that's like your impudence, Dogdyke?' she demanded. 'I put it to you, don't you?'

'Madam,' said Dogdyke, 'I can't fail to know that my occasional visits are not welcomed, or that you regard them as unpleasant episodes in your earthly——' Seeing her hands go up again, he added 'pilgrimage' in a hurry. 'Yes,' he repeated, as if with soothing protest, 'in your earthly pilgrimage. Exactly. Pilgrimage.'

'Now, look here, Dogdyke,' said Mrs. Barton, in a resolute voice; 'if I had taken Tom's advice I should have let you alone long

ago. I should never have helped you any more after the close of the year before last. You and your poor dear little wife—the little wife you misused so badly,—*you* know!’—she shook a denouncing forefinger at him at this point, and Mr. Dogdyke cowered and buried both hands deprecatingly in his coat cuffs. ‘You and your poor dear little wife did me a great service, and I’m willing to remember it; but if you think I am paying you to keep silence, you are the most mistaken man alive. I won’t be threatened, Dogdyke, and if you begin to threaten me as you did last time, I have done with you for ever. Tell me what you want once for all, and I’ll help you this once more, but never again, Dogdyke, never so long as I live. Now, what is it?’

‘Madam,’ said Dogdyke, ‘I have at last lighted upon a little business enterprise, which for its successful prosecution demands only a small capital. If I were but supplied with that, I see no reasonable doubt why I should not elevate myself even to something

like the financial position of which you yourself are so distinguished——’

‘I don’t believe you, Dogdyke,’ she answered, coldly. ‘You wasted your London business on the turf. You broke your poor dear little wife’s heart. You killed her as surely as if you had given her poison. You are a bad man, Dogdyke, and I’m a foolish woman to give you money to throw away at all.’

She had raised her voice somewhat, and in the excitement of her speech had risen and had begun to walk to and fro about the room.

‘Might I be permitted to remind you, madam,’ said Dogdyke, ‘that the domestics are contiguous?’

‘The whole world can hear what I have to say to you,’ she answered. ‘I gave you a hundred pounds last time but one you came, and you threw it all away at Flemington. There’s a bottom to my purse, and there’s an end of my patience. You’ll get to the end of the

one before you come to the bottom of the other.'

'Madam,' said Dogdyke, 'I promise you upon my word of honour that this shall be my last supplication to your generosity.'

'You have promised me that every time you've been here,' she answered, 'but I can tell you that it's the last time you'll ever have help from me, and so you'd better make the most of it. Tell me what you want and make an end.'

'Madam,' said Dogdyke, 'I vow to you that I am in earnest. I have decided to—to reform. I see before me the means not merely of earning an honest livelihood, but of actual wealth if I had——' He paused and rubbed his hands uneasily together.

'If you had what?' she asked.

'The sum is enormous to me,' returned Dogdyke, 'but to you, madam, whom Providence has blessed so extensively, it is but small. I may, indeed, venture to say that it is inconsiderable.'

‘Well?’ she said, impatiently.

‘If I had but the sum of five hundred pounds,’ said Dogdyke.

‘Five hundred pounds,’ she echoed. ‘Now, Dogdyke, understand me once for all. You will get no sum as that from me. I have given way and given way to you until I am actually ashamed of myself. I will go no farther. You can leave my doors at once, and anything else you may get from me you shall have through my husband’s lawyer. I won’t see you starve, and I won’t see you miserable, but if you think you can bite at me in this way you are wrong.’

‘Madam,’ said Dogdyke, standing before her and rubbing his concealed hands with an air of abject propitiation which had something of a threat in it, ‘I do not think that you can be aware of the extent of the obligation it is in my power to confer on you.’

‘The obligation you confer on me?’ she asked with quiet scorn.

‘The obligation I may confer, madam,’ he answered.

‘And what may that be?’ demanded Mrs. Barton.

‘Madam,’ said Mr. Dogdyke, cringing as he spoke, ‘you intrusted my late lamented wife with a sacred charge about three-and-twenty years ago. At your instigation we surrendered that charge to Mr. Denton. Mr. Denton is now, as you are well aware, in Sydney. I have had the pleasure of seeing him in the streets on several occasions, but in my reduced circumstances I have not ventured to recall myself to his remembrance. But I learn from the evening papers, madam, that not only is Mr. Denton here, but’—he lowered his voice and drew his right hand from the coat cuff which had hitherto obscured it, and reached it out timidly towards her, as if to claim her special attention—‘I learn from the evening papers that Mr. Michael Hawthorne is also in Sydney. Now, madam, I would not be disloyal for the world. I have

your secret in my keeping, and I have always respected it.'

She cut him short, and pointed with a sweeping gesture to the door.

'Dogdyke, you may go.'

CHAPTER XIX

DOG DYKE moved with apparent submissiveness towards the door, and his mean figure and shuffling gait made him altogether contemptible in Mrs. Barton's eyes. The crimson-shaded lamp lit the apartment but ineffectively, and she could not read the expression on his face as he turned away. Could she have seen that expression clearly, she would have known that the interview could not be closed there with mutual satisfaction at that point. He shuffled to the door, laid his hand upon the handle, bowed, and turned.

‘Good evening, madam,’ he said in the tone of carneying propitiation he had employed throughout. ‘I am sorry to have incurred your displeasure, and I meant to indicate no more——’

‘You may go, Dogdyke,’ she repeated.

‘Certainly, madam,’ said Dogdyke, ‘certainly. I had only presumed to think that you would not like to have the matter talked about.’

‘You may go,’ she said a third time.

‘Precisely, madam,’ said Dogdyke once more; ‘I am going. I certainly should not have spoken unless I had been authorised to do so. Now that you are good enough to liberate me I am free to announce the young gentleman’s return.’

There was not the faintest touch of a threat in his voice or in his manner, but she read his meaning instantly, and he was obviously not to be trifled with. She had kept her innocent secret for three-and-twenty years, and had kept it for her child’s sake simply and purely; it was more to his interest than ever that it should be kept now. The position she and her husband occupied in the society of Sydney made them prominent, and if once the torch of gossip was applied to their affairs she knew

the blaze would run like wild-fire. Michael, too, was a prominent figure, and was known in the best circles at home. Once let a mere whisper of the story be breathed, and everything would be known. All the patience, all the suffering, all the unrewarded longing of these years would be wasted. The prospect shook her with alarm, but she was resolute not to let her fears be seen.

‘Come back,’ she said. ‘Sit down in that chair again. I am going to have a talk with you before you leave this house.’

‘Yes, madam,’ said Dogdyke submissively, and sidled back into the seat he had recently vacated.

‘Now,’ said Mrs. Barton, ‘since you broke your poor wife’s heart with your worthless, wicked ways, and came out here at Tom’s expense——’

‘I would respectfully submit to you——’ began Dogdyke, but she waved him down with a gesture so emphatic that he stopped short. He hooked his ankles together beneath

the chair : hid both hands in the preposterous big cuffs of his coat, and drew his head into his high collar as a tortoise retires into his shell.

‘You little wretch!’ said Mrs. Barton, moved to out spoken scorn by his look of abject cowardice ; ‘listen to me.’

‘Yes, madam,’ said Dogdyke, ‘I will listen to you with pleasure.’

‘Since you came over here at Tom’s expense, how much have you had from me, first to last, in money?’

‘I have a memorandum at my lodgings, madam,’ Dogdyke answered.

‘And I have got a memorandum in my mind,’ she retorted. ‘You have had seven hundred pounds. I know very well you have never deserved a penny of it, but you have had it because I couldn’t help thinking kindly about old days, and because you and your wife took care of little Michael for me. Oh, I know!’ she continued, in answer to a movement which seemed to threaten interruption

on his part. 'You never cared for the child, but I liked your wife and I kept your worthless little soul in your body because I thought it would have grieved her in her grave to know you were in want. And now, after all I have done for you, you dare to come and threaten me.'

'Threaten, madam!' said Dogdyke. 'Surely you misunderstood me. I am not in a position to threaten; I am only in a position to implore. Here is the absolute truth, Mrs. Barton; the gospel truth. I have sixpence in my pocket; I have no more money in the world. I have been unable to obtain employment. My landlady is resolute in her demand for payment, which I cannot make. I have parted with my very wardrobe; the things I sit in represent my little all—except for the hat I have left in the vestibule, I have no other possessions. Gloves,' he added—'a pair of gloves are in the hat.'

He was so gratuitously explanatory on the matter of these gloves that Mrs. Barton, angry

as she was with him, and full of serious emotion as the last five or six hours had been to her, was more than half inclined to laugh. Her scorn of the miserable little man before her, and her sense of his wicked conduct to his wife, had always been tempered by a certain touch of humour. Somehow she had never been able to take him quite seriously. He had returned to her knowledge after a lapse of twenty years so quaintly mean, so comically shiftless, deprecatory, and cowardly, that she had looked at his vices and follies with something of the pity she would have felt for the naughtiness of a child.

‘It’s your own fault, Dogdyke,’ she answered. ‘You have had enough to keep you in perfect comfort. I’d have helped you again if you had not begun to threaten me.’

‘Madam,’ cried Dogdyke, ‘I beg you to be assured that you do me an injustice. Why should I threaten my benefactress?’

‘Now, Dogdyke,’ she answered, sitting down resolutely before him, ‘you and me

have got to understand each other, and we're going to do it. I've helped you up to now for the sake of old times. You may have thought in your wicked little heart that I helped you because I was afraid of you. That would be very like you, Dogdyke, and I dare say it's true.'

'Upon my word, madam,' he interrupted her—'upon my word of honour I have never attributed your kindness to any motives but those of the most disinterested benevolence.'

'Well,' she said curtly, 'I don't believe it. It's my belief that all along you have fancied I was paying you to hold your tongue.'

The surmise was perfectly true, and if she had not been a woman of unusual simplicity of character she might have arrived at it long ago.

'You think you've got a hold on me. Very well, that's true enough. You have got it in your power to do me a mischief. I'd do almost anything in the world to keep you from talking about my affairs. You know

that, and if you had the heart of a man in you you couldn't even so much as dream of doing it for shame. But you just understand this, Dogdyke. I won't pay you to keep quiet, because I am not going to make myself your slave. I am not going to pay a greedy, hungry little wretch like you to bite at me month after month and year after year. If you're wicked and ungrateful enough to do it, go and tell the story on the housetops now.'

'Madam,' said Dogdyke feebly, 'you wrong me.'

'Wrong you,' she cried. 'What did you mean when you stood there a minute or two ago, and told me you supposed that you were free to speak?'

'I beseech you, madam,' said Dogdyke, 'let bygones be bygones. Assist me out of the pure kindness of your heart, as you have done hitherto.'

'You come and ask me for five hundred pounds she answered. 'Don't I know very well

that you'd never have dared to ask me for such a sum as that if you hadn't thought you had some hold upon me?'

'I have explained already,' said Dogdyke, 'that I have a business enterprise before me by which, if I had the possession of that sum, I could realise affluence. It is a fact, madam. It is a fact, believe me.'

'You'll get no five hundred pounds from me,' she answered firmly, 'and I don't believe you've got any enterprise at all. I'll tell you what I'll do with you, Dogdyke: I'll persuade Tom to take you back into the office at four pounds a week. That's the salary you had before, and it's four pounds a week more than you're worth, as you very well know. I'll do that for the sake of old times; and if ever you speak a word to hurt my child, Tom shall know where it comes from, and I shall leave you to him.'

Mr. Dogdyke had his characteristics. He was really almost as much of a coward as he had grown to look, and yet he had a certain tenacity of purpose in him, and was not easily

to be driven from an object. He was horribly afraid of Mrs. Barton, and even more than her he dreaded her husband. Tom's sentiment of remembrance of old times had made him no tenderer to Dogdyke, and the little man in the course of a few months spent in his employment had learned to conceive a positive terror of his rebuke.

'Tom would give you such a flogging,' Mrs. Barton interjected, 'as you never had in all your life. You had better think twice before you make mischief.'

'Madam,' pleaded Dogdyke, 'there is no mischief in my mind ; but I do assure you that if I had the money I spoke of I could see my way to prosperity for life. Should I re-enter upon a menial situation now, at my advanced time of life, what hope have I of making a provision for old age ? I don't mean mischief, Mrs. Barton, indeed I don't. Nothing is further from my thoughts.'

'There's my offer, Dogdyke,' Mrs. Barton answered, 'you can take it or leave it, as you

like. I won't pay a thankless little wretch like you to torture me.'

'Oh, madam ! madam !' moaned Dogdyke, writhing his hands below his cuffs.

'It is no use asking,' she retorted, with an utter certainty of manner which belied her heart ; 'I know very well that you no more dare give Tom and me away than you dare hold your hand in the fire. I'd have helped you again as I have done before if you hadn't begun to threaten me, but now I've done with you. You can go, Dogdyke.'

She knew that she was doing the wisest and even the only wise thing, but she was playing for an enormous stake, and she trembled as she accepted the hazard of the game.

Dogdyke made no attempt to rise, but, on the contrary, seemed anew to obliterate himself still further. He thrust his hands higher into his coat cuffs, hooked his ankles still more retiringly beneath the chair he sat on, and did his best to absorb his head

within the high collar, as he murmured something brokenly about being misconstrued. But Mrs. Barton, rising with a sudden movement of final resolution, laid a finger on the button of an electric bell beside the mantel-piece. The clear tinkle of the summons sounded from the servants' quarters, and Dogdyke, as if electrified by it, arose and stood before her.

‘Madam! Mrs. Barton!’ he said, in a pleading whisper, ‘don’t cast an old friend penniless into the streets. I have sixpence in my pocket and that is all. If I cannot pay my rent to-night I am turned out of the house. Don’t do that to me. I did you a service once, madam.’

‘And I paid you seven hundred pounds for it,’ she answered. ‘You see, Dogdyke, it doesn’t do to threaten me.’

A rap sounded at the door and a servant at her bidding entered. As the door opened Dogdyke uttered a feeble protesting whine, the very grotesqueness of which excited in

Mrs. Barton's mind a half-contemptuous, half-angry pity.

‘Bring me my keys,’ she said to the servant, and the domestic having retired, she turned once more to Dogdyke. ‘You shall have a pound,’ she said, ‘to keep you until you can begin to work. Tom shall take you back again and shall pay you four pounds a week. If you get drunk any more you will be dismissed again, and then I shall have done with you. If you say a word about Mr. Hawthorne, Tom will give you a flogging. Now we understand each other.’

He stood wretchedly before her, not daring to offer any further plea. But his small soul was like a simmering little caldron of venom, and, in spite of his meek and harmless exterior, he was charged at the moment with wicked intent from head to foot. Had he dared, or had he been able, he would have beaten the majestic, matronly woman who so dominated him. He would be even somehow, he declared, for, by that singular inverse

faculty of reasoning which is the special birthright of the ingrate, he had decided firmly that it was he who in this matter was deserving of sympathy, and he who was threatened with undeserved troubles.

The servant reappeared with the keys for which her mistress had asked. Mary unlocked her little escritoire, took from it a cash-box, unlocked that in turn, and handed to Dogdyke a single one-pound note.

‘There,’ she said, ‘is the last money you will ever get from me. Take it.’

For a second, what with that bubbling venom of his heart, and what with the sting of some awakening of the dwarfed and stunted manhood in him, he made no movement.

‘Take it,’ she repeated. The impulse towards manhood died. He slid his right hand out of the opposite coat cuff, accepted the note without a word, and bowed. ‘Now,’ she said, ‘I told you that we would understand each other. We do, and you can go.’

He shuffled into the hall, crumpling the

note unconsciously in his hand, and forgetting, in the baffled rage that filled him, to speak a word of farewell or thanks. He took his hat and gloves, let himself out of the house, and, standing bare-headed on the gravelled drive, shook his fist at the illuminated glass door.

2

CHAPTER XX

THE Count von Herder, punctual to the minute, appeared at the Union Club and asked for Mr. Hawthorne. He was scrupulously attired, for he knew the value of dress, and never lost a hair's breadth of such advantages as tailor, shoemaker, hatter, and glover could lend him. An ill-dressed *chevalier d'industrie* is an anomaly which is almost a contradiction in terms. Three days before, at the garden party, the Count had presented a monotone of lavender colour; to-day he was a harmony of pale drabs. The morning sack coat became him no less nobly than the frock, but he could afford to be less unbending in it. He carried a cane under his arm, and he produced a card-case with a blazing heraldic device upon it.

‘The Count Wolfgang von Herder,’ he said to the porter as he handed his card. ‘The Count Wolfgang von Herder to see Mr. Michael Hawthorne.’

The porter was not certain whether it was the correct thing to call a count my lord, or sir, or your worship. He compromised by calling him nothing at all.

‘Mr. Hawthorne has left the club.’

The Count started, and gave a quick little glance at the man, but recovering himself immediately, asked with more than his usual suavity of manner if Mr. Hawthorne had left an address behind him.

‘Yes,’ the man answered. ‘He has gone to stay with Mr. Thomas Barton, at the Grampians, at Pott’s Point.’

The Count von Herder whistled at this, raised his eyebrows whimsically, and then broke into a short laugh.

‘Thank you, my goot frient, thank you,’ he said, quite overwhelming the porter with foreign urbanities, and turning on his heel he

swaggered into the street and there hailed a cab.

A dozen times on his journey his face assumed an expression of bewilderment, and once or twice he became actually depressed. But he dispelled this feeling with a shake of the head, and consoled himself by a reference to a written document which he carried in his pocket-book. Arrived at the Grampians, he ordered his driver to wait, and marched majestically into the house. At the door he met the man of his search, and held out a hand to him which was quietly disregarded.

‘You have something to say to me, I understand?’ began Hawthorne.

‘Yes, my dear and esteemed friend; I have something to say to you,’ returned Von Herder.

‘Good!’ said Hawthorne. ‘I have something to say to you. Come to my room.’

His tone boded no good, but the Count smiled placidly as he followed him. Haw-

thorne bounded upstairs, taking two steps at a time ; but the elder man was too portly for that sort of exercise, and pursued him with leisurely dignity. Hawthorne was waiting impatiently at his bedroom door when Von Herder arrived upon the landing.

‘Come in here,’ he said ; ‘I don’t fancy we shall detain one another long.’

‘I am not quite so sure of that,’ the Count replied. ‘We shall see py-and-py.’

He entered, and Hawthorne closed the door and faced round upon him.

‘Before you say your word to me, permit me to clear my own mind with respect to you. If after to-day you again presume to address me any further, or under any circumstances, I shall offer you personal chastisement.’

‘Now! now! now!’ cried the Count, shrilly, and more emphatically with each repetition. ‘Why will you be so very imbetuous? You are entirely in error my egcellent yonk frient. Forgive me for

saying it—you are absolutely and entirely in error. In one hour from now you will be my warmest ally, my most devoted friend; you will regard me with emotions of which at present you believe yourself incapable.'

He smiled sweetly as he spoke, and leaned forward with his hat in one hand and his walking-cane in the other, to touch Hawthorne on either elbow.

'Hands off!' cried the young fellow; 'lay a finger on the sleeve of my coat and I'll knock you down. I have that sort of liking for you, Count von Herder, which most men have for a snake. Keep your distance.'

'Very well,' the Count answered, unmoved and smiling still, 'you have spoken your worst, eh? Shall I speak mine?'

He smiled until his great moustache curled upward, showing his white teeth; his fat cheeks creased into fleshy rolls, and his blue eyes glistened behind his glasses.

'Say your say and go,' said Hawthorne.

He called to mind afterwards a certain creepy and eerie feeling which at this moment assailed him—a sensation of impending disaster, or of a power for mischief in this smiling scoundrel, which he strove vainly to deride as a mere superstition.

‘I shall say my say,’ returned the Count, ‘but when I have said it you will not ask me to go. You will find that we are going to be such egcellent comrades, my tear Hawthorne, such egcellent, egcellent comrades.’

Still creasing his fat cheeks and baring his gleaming white teeth with the same unvarying smile, and still keeping his blue eyes fixed on Hawthorne’s face, he fell to groping in his inner breast pocket, and after a moment’s purposed loss of time drew out his pocket-book, and took from it the paper he had consulted in the cab.

‘Shall we pegin with this?’ he asked. ‘Yes, I think we will pegin with this.’ He offered it to Hawthorne, who declined to take it. ‘As you please, my goot sir, as you

please. It concerns you very closely. I will read it to you.'

He read it in a deliberate voice aloud. It was a document purporting to be signed by John Sanders and Henry Bilby, solicitors, of Sydney, and certifying that it contained the true copy of an original document submitted to them, and left in their care by the Count Wolfgang von Herder. The Count read so far, and looked up as if to see if he had yet succeeded in making an impression.

'Well,' said Hawthorne, 'what has this to do with me?'

'Shall I sit down?' the Count returned. 'Shall we both sit down? My young friend, you are on the eve of a great discovery. If you are provided with such a thing as a glass of brandy I should recommend you to have it in readiness.' He had taken a seat on his own invitation, but Hawthorne remained standing, and looked sternly and contemptuously down on him. The Count still smiled, and the young man was not altogether free

from that sense of impending mischief which had assailed him a little earlier.

‘Go on, if you please,’ he said ; ‘tell me what that has to do with me.’

‘I am coming to that,’ the Count retorted. ‘This is a document’—he inspected it smilingly with his head on one side—‘which relates to the birth of Michael Hawthorne—Barton.’ He made a pause between the second and third names, and spoke the third with a lingering triumph. ‘I have another document here.’ He produced his pocket-book again, and rummaged in it anew. ‘It is signed by the captain of the Cascades at Hobart Town. You’ll find, if you care to read it, that it relates to the history of Thomas Barton, a convict of good conduct, and the father of Michael Hawthorne’—he made the same significant pause once more before he dropped the name ‘Barton.’

‘You infamous scoundrel!’ Hawthorne stammered out.

The Count stood up to face him, and if needs were to defend himself.

‘Be calm, my friend,’ he said, ‘be calm. Now, don’t excite yourself, I beg.’

‘Go on!’ said Hawthorne, controlling himself by a tremendous effort.

There are moments in life when a chance revelation of a single truth or even of a solitary possibility casts an altogether novel complexion upon many things observed before and supposed to have been understood. Hawthorne had arranged his scheme about the Bartons and himself. The strange look with which his hostess had regarded him on their first meeting had been explained; the emotion shown both by husband and wife had been explained; the tender kindness with which he had been surrounded from the moment of his arrival in the house had been explained, and the explanation had seemed natural and sufficing. But the suggestion conveyed in Von Herder’s speech shed a new light on everything. He did

not yet believe it, and yet it illuminated all for him.

‘You would like to know,’ the Count began after a pause, ‘how the orichinals of these tocuments came into my hands? It is an interesting little story. There is a frient of mine in your native island, my tear Hawthorne, who grows the most peautiful fruit. He is very proud of his fruit, and he believes that it makes a finer conserve than any other fruit in the world. He is a fery chenerous man, this frient of mine, and he likes to give people pleasure in small vays as well as in larch vays. He sent me a dozen of assorted conserves, all of his own cook’s making, and he sent them from his farm to me at Hobart.’

‘Give me that paper,’ said Hawthorne, stretching out his hand. The Count obeyed, and watched him smilingly as he peered over the blank page at the back of the document. ‘Now go on.’

‘Assurety! The orichinals of these faluable papers came to me with that dozen of

assorted conserves, my dear Hawthorne. They were thrust in between the pots, together with many other interesting documents, to prevent them from rattling and preaking on the chourney. It is, undoubtedly, very wicked, and very foolish ; but it seems, my dear friend, for I have made inquiry, it seems that the Tasmanian Government has been so ill-advised as to sell the old convict archives for waste paper. Now, if these had fallen into other hands, they might have been put to mischievous use. Eh !'

Hawthorne had begun to read the document by this time, and went through it from first to last in silence. Thomas Barton, so the chaplain of the Cascade prison set forth, had been known to him for three years. The crime for which the convict suffered, the place of trial, and the length of sentence were alike set down ; then the conduct of the convict was dealt with, and finally the chaplain recommended that the request of the convict that he might be permitted to marry

Mary Duffield, a servant in the Governor's household, should be granted.

‘You have done with that?’ said the Count, when Hawthorne laid the paper on the dressing-table, and began mechanically to smooth it with the palm of his hand. ‘Now you will reat this for yourself.’

‘Come to your point,’ said Hawthorne; ‘I have given you already more time than I care to spend in your society.’

‘It is altogether,’ said the Count, throwing one leg over the other, and caressing his moustache with gloved thumb and finger, ‘it is altogether an interesting little history. Thomas Barton, the gonvict of goot pehaviour, marries by permission Mary Tuffield, laty's maid to the wife of the Governor at Hobart Town. They are plessed in due time with a child—a poy; they gristen the poy Michael Hawthorne, and they send him to Enkland that he may have no stain of the gonvict name upon him. The father finds silver on the little farm bought with the

money the wife has saved or inherited, and he becomes protigiously rich. He pretends to the poy that he was the partner of that poy's father; but Tom Barton never had a partner.'

'Suppose all this to be true,' said Hawthorne; 'what has it to do with you, and what use do you propose to make of it?'

'Ah! now, my yonk frient,' said the Count, 'we are getting near to pusiness; as the children say in an amusing little game in which I have often assisted the little ones at home—we are getting varm.'

Hawthorne's brain was whirling, and for the moment he was incapable of definite thought. He knew, in spite of that, that the story here laid before him might be true, and he knew that the fat and smiling scoundrel who told it meant in some way to make a tool or catspaw of him by virtue of it.

'Suppose it is true,' he repeated; 'what then?'

‘My tear yonk frient,’ the Count responded, ‘it is drue. I am in a position to prove it. I have here, under my thumb, a little vorthless frightened person who took charge of the child on its way to Enkland, and who handed it to the care of our egcellent friend—our dear mutual friend—Mr. Denton.’

There another gleam of light seemed to flash over Hawthorne’s mind, and in it to show, confusedly, Denton’s reluctance to introduce him to the house in which this surprising revelation was made to him; his reluctance to stay in it, the hitherto inexplicable temper in which he had received the invitation tendered to him by the Bartons. Strange and unusual as the story was, he had hardly the power to discredit it from that moment.

‘You ask,’ the Count pursued, still smiling and at ease, ‘what I propose to do. You are yonk, my dear frient, as yet, and I am rapidly advancing towards middle age. There

is that tiffence between us: but we are poth men of the world. I am a chentleman; you are a chentleman. I do not propose to take an undue advantage of my knowledge; but I do propose to afail myself of it in limitation—in strict limitation. Should you very much object to my smoking a cigarette in your petroom?’

Hawthorne returned no answer, and the Count produced a silver cigarette case, and a silver match box, which bore the same heraldic emblem which blazed upon the pocket book and card case. He lit a cigarette and sat tranquilly smoking, peering with half-closed eyes through his glasses at his companion.

‘Well!’ said Hawthorne, after a lengthy pause.

‘Well!’ said the Count. ‘I am, as I daresay you know, font of goot society. I am here a chentleman, the head of an ancient and honourable house, and yet I know almost nopoty. You are here, and by reason of

your wealth and your position as an English chentleman, you know everyptoty. You shall lend me a helping hand ; you shall introtuce me to the Governor, to your friend, Cheneral Mallard. That is all I ask. You shall intro-tuce me to the best people ; that is all.'

Hawthorne's mind began to work clearly once more, and he could face the position.

'What you have told me,' he said, 'may be true, or it may not be true. The first thing I have to do is to inquire into its truth—or, rather,' he corrected himself, 'that is the second thing I have to do ; the first is to request you to leave this house.'

'Do not act in haste to repent at leisure, my yonk frient,' said the Count, smiling still, but with an air of less triumph than he had worn before. 'I ask of you a very little serfice, and I propose by my silence to render you a very creat one. How long do you suppose, Mr. Hawthorne, that you will oggupy the place you hold in English society, or here, if I should open my mouth and

‘speak the truth? I observed in yesterday’s paper a paragraph which announces your impending marriage. Do you think the statement I have it in my power to make would in any degree influence the lady whom you propose to honour with your hand, or the father who permits your attentions?’

‘I wish you to understand, Count von Herder,’ said Hawthorne, steadily, ‘that, whether your story be true or false, I will hold no communion with you. I will not make myself responsible for your introduction to any honourable person, and I shall defy you to do your utmost.’

‘You are so very impetuous!’ said the Count.

‘Would you so far oblige me as to leave the house?’ said Hawthorne. ‘I gave you a meeting here because at the moment that your insolence demanded it I was accompanied by a lady in whose presence I did not choose to quarrel. I know you for a convicted thief and swindler, and I will have

nothing whatever to do with you. If the story you have told me should prove to be true, I shall act as I am advised by those who have the best right to advise me, but I shall not submit myself to the coercion of a man of your reputation. Your mission has failed, sir; nothing remains for you but to relieve me of your presence.'

'I should advise you not to defy me, Mr. Hawthorne,' the Count returned. His assurance was well-nigh perfect, for he had learned his lesson in many schools, but it was a little shaken for the moment. His face had lost its ordinary suavity and had turned pale, while his breath came haltingly.

Hawthorne's sole reply to this last speech was to ring the bell.

'I will save you any trouble on that account,' said Von Herder. 'I think I can find my way. You will do yourself a service, my dear friend, if you will remember that I can be dangerous. I am not to be trifled with. I do not come here with any *brutum*

fulmen. I haf ample broofs of the facts I adduce, and if I am triven to it I shall use them. You are goot enough to make reflections on my gareer; but what do I ask you? Nothing but an introtuction to honourable society.'

A knock sounded at the door.

'Come in,' cried Hawthorne. His valet entered, and stood to await orders. 'Kindly show this gentleman downstairs,' said Hawthorne. 'See him out of the house, and out of the grounds. When you have done that you can come back to me.'

The Count took up his hat from the bed on which he had laid it, set his walking-cane under his arm, arranged his tie at the glass which stood above the mantelpiece, smoothed his gloves with a leisurely, preoccupied air, bowed, brought both heels together with his usual ceremonious flourish, and so departed. He did not, as Dogdyke had done three days earlier, turn and shake his fist at the house, but carefully calling back to his face the

smile which had flown from it towards the close of his interview with Hawthorne, he entered the cab once more, and bade the driver convey him to his lodgings in another quarter of the town.

CHAPTER XXI

THE news thus unexpectedly brought to Hawthorne shook him, and even astonished him, far less than might have been imagined. There was one excellent reason why the shock should fall lightly upon him. All his life long, without his having in the least suspected it, he had been prepared for this revelation by Denton. The shrewd barrister and man of the world had always recognised the possibility of a revelation of the relationship, and he had so thoroughly drilled into his ward a belief in Tom Barton's innocence, and had inspired him with so high an opinion of the ex-convict's probity and honour, that Hawthorne had always regarded his unrecognised father as a great heroic figure, dignified by undeserved suffering, and elevated into a

certain region of romance, whose denizens are never without attraction to young and generous men.

There had been always a feeling of mist and uncertainty about his own origin which made the discovery of living parents not unwelcome. He was learning already to love these simple people, if only out of the fact that they cherished so obvious and genuine an affection for himself—to learn that they were his father and mother, and to be forced to the recognition of the fact that loving him as they did they had voluntarily, and for his own good, robbed their hearts of his ownership, surely was a tie which no honourable man could disregard.

He sank into an armchair in his own room, and with his head buried in his hands devoted himself to hard thinking, striving to make out for himself a clear plan of the whole case, and to determine upon his own conduct. Denton could at once have assured him of the truth or falsehood of the whole

story, but Denton had that morning gone away up country to look at a certain property in which he was interested, and would not be back again for three or four days at least. It was not easy to appeal either to Barton or to his wife. If Von Herder had told the truth—and on mature consideration of the case Hawthorne was disposed to believe he had—then they had held in view a serious purpose, had suffered for it in loneliness and in privation of the heart for many years, and would naturally desire to preserve the fruit of their own suffering. He sat for a long time so completely absorbed in his own thoughts that he altogether disregarded the passage of the hours.

He could see nothing quite clearly, but in a confused, dim fashion he made out many things. It was likely enough if Von Herder's tale were true that he would be parted from his sweetheart, and this looked sufficiently desperate. He was young, and was passionately in love. He had been almost deliriously

happy, and now, though his love affairs had run prosperously, though the girl of his heart had accepted him, and there had been no visible obstacle in his path, it seemed likely that the end of all things had come. To have lost a wife and found a mother seemed after all a cold bargain. He was by no means cold-hearted, and he could hardly conceive an appeal which a mother might make to him to which he would not willingly have responded. Here the mother made no appeal save that tacit call to guard the secret she had herself so long and so carefully buried. He heard and he did not hear the rustle of a dress outside, and a somewhat hasty and impatient footstep pacing the corridor. A voice spoke outside at last, and recalled him to the fact that this impatient step had traversed the corridor for some time.

‘Phœbe!’ said the voice, ‘rap at Mr. Hawthorne’s door and ask if he is ready.’

The voice, if the tale he had heard was true, was his mother’s, and it gave him a

curious thrill to hear it. He stood quietly helpless, like a man in a dream, half wishing, but only half wishing, to rise, but feeling himself incapable of motion. A rap sounded at the door, and he cried 'Come in!'

'Mrs. Barton,' said the trim serving maid, holding the door a little ajar, 'wants to know if you are ready, sir.'

He walked out into the corridor, and there stood Mrs. Barton, attired for out of doors, looking almost regally handsome in her fashionable fineries. From the very first moment in which he had encountered her he had remarked the affectionate character of her glance. He caught it now. Her eyes fairly beamed upon him with a tender and demure complacency. In that second the story of Count von Herder was verified once and for all, and he knew the truth, and knew that he could never doubt it any more.

'Are you ready, Mr. Hawthorne?' she asked.

The name struck strange and chill ; there

was a gulf between them, near as they were to each other, which he had no right to over-leap.

‘Ready?’ he asked, with a bewildered look.

‘Surely you haven’t forgotten,’ Mrs. Barton answered. ‘We ought to have been there at half-past one; it will take us a quarter of an hour to drive, and it is twenty minutes to two already.’

‘I beg your pardon,’ he answered, confusedly; ‘I will be ready in five minutes. I had forgotten.’

There was a breakfast party that day at the house of a Mrs. Vincent—a wealthy widow of whom Hawthorne had heard once or twice, but whom he had not met so far, and at her house General Mallard and his daughter had undertaken to be present. Barton was busy, and Michael had agreed to be Mrs. Barton’s escort. Under ordinary circumstances the social engagement which just then involved a meeting with Clara would hardly have been

overlooked, but his mind was shocked from its average bounds, and the thing had altogether escaped his memory.

He dressed hastily and emerged from his room with a strange light of excitement in his eyes. From the very first he had seemed handsome, stately, and noble to his mother's fancy, and it is likely enough that if he had been much less prepossessing even than he was really, the mother's hungry eyes would have dignified and beautified him with all manner of graces ; but she thought now that he had never looked so handsome, so strong, so lovable. If she could only have taken him in her arms, and told him all ! If she could only have rained kisses on his face !

Heroism takes strange fancies, and is sometimes a very useless thing except that it makes a pretty fable and is useful by way of illustration in an after-dinner oration. The Spartan boy might better have let the fox escape than have hidden it under his cloak, and Mary Barton need never have tortured herself with

the years of absence from her child, nor have hidden at all the secret which now was burning within her.

So long as the knowledge of the truth had existed only on one side, intercourse between mother and son had been tolerable ; but now a profound embarrassment spread from one to the other, and though Mary had not the faintest guess that Michael had been informed of their relationship she felt a subtle intuition of the fact. His eyes wore a new look, there was a change in the tone of his voice, his manner had unconsciously altered. They had descended the stairs together, and together entered the carriage which awaited them.

‘ You’ll like Mrs. Vincent,’ said Mary, seizing the first topic she could think of to banish the embarrassing silence. ‘ She is a dear, good creature, with as fine a heart as any woman in the world. You may be inclined to laugh at her, but I am sure you won’t show it.’

‘I hope not,’ Hawthorne answered. ‘Who is she?’

‘She’s Bob Vincent’s widow,’ said Mary. ‘She’s very rich, and has a beautiful house; but you won’t have known her five minutes before she will tell you that she came out to the colonies as a cook. Vincent and Tom were great friends, and they were both in the Assembly together. He was a self-made man like Tom, and had hardly a penny when he came to the colonies. He left a great fortune behind him.’

‘Money seems to be easily made out here,’ said Hawthorne, speaking with something of an effort, but determined to keep the conversation ball rolling if he could.

‘Money! bless your soul,’ cried Mary; ‘the lucky people here shovel up money as if it were dirt. Look at Tom. If Tom had stopped in England he might have been making six pounds a week, and now sometimes for weeks together he’ll make half as much as that a minute.’

‘Mr. Barton, I suppose, is an exceptionally wealthy man,’ said Hawthorne. He felt still like a man in a dream, and spoke by mere mechanism.

‘Yes,’ she answered, ‘Tom’s very rich, and getting richer every day. There’s nobody to come after us, and what the money’s being gathered for I don’t know. It’s a good thing to have enough ; but it’s rather hard to have too much. It makes you feel too responsible, Mr. Hawthorne.’

Again the name had a chill and foreign sound for him. He was riding to meet the sweetheart whom he might soon be compelled to surrender, and he was sitting by the side of the mother whose heart he knew to be yearning for him, and he was in a complex state of dread, surprise, and awakening affection, the like of which cannot have assailed a man’s heart often. He spoke on pure impulse.

‘Don’t call me Mr. Hawthorne any longer, Mrs. Barton, I don’t like it.’ She

turned a half-frightened look upon him, and held him in her gaze for a second or two.

‘What shall I call you?’ she asked him, pantingly.

‘Call me by my Christian name,’ he answered. They were riding in an open carriage, and every now and again Mary had to return the salutes of a friendly passer-by. The play of emotion was restricted, but had the two been alone and unobserved, the chances are that the whole truth would have escaped at that moment. She laid her gloved hand on his and pressed it for a mere instant.

‘Thank you,’ she said, and that was all.

Hawthorne’s heart burned, but he was compelled to be silent. Two or three minutes passed before either of them spoke again.

‘You call me nothing now, Mrs. Barton,’ said Hawthorne; ‘I haven’t offended you by my freedom, have I?’

She turned to look at him, and in spite of

herself her eyes filled with tears. She patted and pressed his hand once more and turned away, murmuring, 'My dear!' in a tone of affectionate protestation.

After this there was no more speech between them until they arrived at the house of Mrs. Vincent, and took their places amongst the crowd of chattering guests. Here for a little time they were separated. Each at once resumed self-control, and at least an outward equanimity.

'You are late, Hawthorne,' said General Mallard, 'and I fancy that one or two of the people here are rather objurgating you in their hearts. The fat man in the white waistcoat yonder has been groaning about hunger for the last twenty minutes. He doesn't look as if he had suffered much from that complaint in his lifetime, but he feels the pangs keenly I assure you.'

"The hand of little employment," said Hawthorne, "hath the daintier sense."

But the quotation passed ineffectively

over the head of General Mallard, who professed no acquaintance with the poets.

‘Exactly,’ he said, vaguely. ‘Quite so. Precisely. Clara, dear, here is Mr. Hawthorne. Haven’t you young people anything to say to each other? Oh, here’s a movement to the table. Hawthorne, see to Clara; I am told off to the lady in black yonder.’

He limped away as he spoke, leaving Hawthorne and his daughter together.

‘Eh ! mon Prince !’ said Clara.

‘Eh ! ma Princesse !’ returned Hawthorne, trying to smile.

‘What makes you so late?’ she asked.

‘It is all my fault,’ he responded. ‘I had forgotten the engagement.’

She knitted her brows half in real surprise and half in pretended anger, but almost before the facial gesture was effected she found time to be seriously wounded.

‘You had forgotten the engagement?’ she repeated.

‘Yes,’ he returned at once, absent and awkward. ‘I had quite forgotten it.’

‘Perhaps,’ she retorted, ‘you may have desired to obliterate another engagement from your mind?’

‘Another,’ he said, turning with an inquiring and startled look. ‘I don’t quite understand.’

‘Ours,’ she said, withdrawing the hand she had placed upon his arm. He seized it, and restored it to its place, oblivious for the moment of the presence of the crowd.

‘I must explain hereafter,’ he said; ‘I have been greatly perplexed and disturbed.’ Her hand touched his arm lightly, a mere featherweight of a caress which indicated complete reconciliation and understanding.

‘You shall tell me when you can,’ she murmured, ‘when you will.’

‘You can’t believe——’ began Hawthorne, in a tone too intimate and tender for the time and place.

‘You don’t know,’ she responded, with a flippant laugh, ‘how far my faith can go.’

The tone wounded her lover for a mere instant, but almost at the same moment it recalled him to himself and to the fact that a great many eyes were observant of them. He laughed shortly, and, looking down upon her, nodded.

‘A ready understanding,’ said Miss Mal-lard, ‘is an excellent endowment.’

Hawthorne’s balance was half restored, but the task of sitting out the breakfast and holding his sweetheart in conversation bade fair to be a hard one.

It was his duty in one way or another, so he felt, to be sure of the story which had been told him, and it seemed base beyond measure to wait until the declaration of his parentage should be made by an enemy. He was young, and perhaps a little quixotic in his thoughts. If Von Herder should keep his word, and make public declaration of the

verity of the story he had told that morning, Hawthorne knew full well that the city would ring with it for a day or two, and that it must inevitably travel everywhere. Public shame would fall upon him, and he was indignantly ashamed of himself to know that he would regard it as a shame.

It would be a better and a manlier thing to assure himself of the truth, and himself to proclaim it. In this case honour was no more costly than dishonour, and that reflection is comforting. It was as cheap to go right as to cower and hesitate, and still the weight upon him almost forbade him to walk erect. It was no wonder if for once Clara found him a dull companion.

All on a sudden, while he sat trifling absently with his plate, there came one of those sudden lulls in conversation which are so notable at convivial assemblies, and a voice struck through it, high-pitched and acrid :—

‘But, my tear and respected laty,’ said

the voice, and then up soared the renewed *brouhaha* once again, and obscured completely the remainder of the sentence.

Hawthorne turned with a quick start in the direction of the speaker, and to his utter and complete amazement beheld the Count von Herder, who sat leaning forward, his arms half-embracing the plate before him, and his hands flourishingly extended towards the hostess, who was but one or two places removed from him.

The Count was back once more in his lavender—lavender tie, lavender coat, lavender waistcoat—a prodigious diamond ring, real or false, embraced his scarf, and his fat white fingers glittered with many jewels, his gold-rimmed spectacles glittered, and his eyes gleamed. He was evidently full of the friendliest *empressement*. Hawthorne looked across in undisguised and disgusted amazement to find this published rascal here in the midst of a society which was not merely reputable, but included many of the best-known and

most exclusive members of the colonial aristocracy.

The Count, caught by the instinct of the eye, turned round, adjusted his glasses with a swift motion of the hand, and smiled at Hawthorne placidly and sweetly as a child.

Hawthorne regarded him with angry disdain for an instant, turned away, and said something, he barely knew what, to his companion.

‘Mr. Hawthorne!’ said the Count’s distinctly foreign voice. ‘Mr. Hawthorne!’ There was no response. ‘Mr. Hawthorne!’ said the voice again, suasive and insistent, and to the ear of the one man who understood the tone, threatening—‘Mr. Hawthorne!’ Still there was no answer, and somehow a hush fell on all the table. The Count’s voice sounded clearly.

‘May I haf the pleasure of drinking a class of wine with you, Mr. Hawthorne?’

Hawthorne turned, half rose from his seat, his hands shaking a little on the table; his

eyes met those of the Count, which were insolently sure of triumph.

‘May I haf the pleasure?’ Von Herder asked.

‘No, sir,’ said Hawthorne, loudly and distinctly, ‘you may not!’

A bombshell might have exploded in the apartment [and have produced little more consternation.

CHAPTER XXII

MICHAEL resumed his seat with a white face in the midst of an audible silence.

‘I had trusted,’ said the Count’s voice, ‘that a little misunderstanding was at an end.’

There is perhaps no tool in the whole of the labour-house of humanity which is on occasion so useful to the man who really knows how to handle it as insolence. Von Herder’s effrontery was almost matchless, and except by the directest weapons it was impossible to fight against him. He was armed in triple brass against even the most open insults. He had been kicked out of a hundred societies with ignominy, and had begun his career anew by insolence after each ejection, without feeling that one scale in his

armour had been cut away. He was shameless on his own side and, of course, impervious to the shame of others.

There is a kind of man who will do base things without recognising their baseness for himself, and who only becomes conscious of his own rascality when detected and proclaimed. There are very few of the meaner people in the world who regard their own meanness, or esteem it at the proper value until it is detected, but most men are happily conscious of the needs of their fellow-creatures.

The Count von Herder was phenomenal, and respected the shame of his brother men no more than he would have respected his own. To have cowered, even for a moment, to have quailed before the broadest and most scornful rebuff might in many instances in his career have been fatal to him. Life to him was a constant game of bluff, and he had played it for a quarter of a century on a worthless hand. When he won he won, and

pocketed the proceeds with a willing alacrity. When he lost he accepted the next deal which fate might offer with a settled calm which would have been heroic in a man of principle.

Human motives are mixed things and are hard to analyse. Barring a certain moral quality which was completely lacking in him, there was much to admire in this finished and polished scoundrel. His courage was beyond dispute. Nothing in the world or out of it could frighten him, and if that magnificent self-possession of his had belonged to a good man it would have been a quality for a good man to admire. As it was, it belonged to a scoundrel, and became a thing to be detested.

The general sense of the table was against Hawthorne, who was too proud and high-minded to hold a public squabble or to denounce Von Herder in the terms which rose to his lips. He might have arisen in his place and have said, 'You are, to my personal

knowledge, a thief and an adventurer,' but that would scarcely have seemed a fitting thing to do in the presence of ladies and strangers. A purely disdainful silence seemed to the young man to be his only refuge, and yet he felt discomfited and knew that he was at a disadvantage.

'Who is that man?' Clara asked him, in a half whisper. 'I have seen him before. Wasn't it he who made an appointment to meet you this morning at the Union Club?'

'That was he,' said Hawthorne, brusquely.

'You met him this morning?' she asked. 'He kept the appointment?'

'Yes,' said Hawthorne. 'He kept the appointment.'

'Why do you meet him,' she asked, naturally enough, 'since you so much dislike him?'

'Let's talk of something else,' Hawthorne returned; 'I can't explain to you now, but I will when I see you later. I may have something of serious import to tell you.'

The girl froze and went silent. She laid down her knife and fork, folded her hands and looked before her for a moment, and then, turning to the neighbour on her left, opened up a conversation which at first seemed artificial, but by-and-by became, to outward appearance, animated.

Hawthorne felt himself more and more divided from the world. He felt that in the minds of everybody present he had been guilty of an unseasonable discourtesy, and he alone knew in how far he had fallen short of actual duty in that direction. It was intolerable to him to think that, knowing what he knew, he should allow Von Herder to sit at the table with the pick of the people of the country in which he himself was an accepted and honoured guest, and should not have found the courage to denounce him.

That glorious imperturbable insolence of Von Herder had offered him an opportunity for the exposure of its owner and exponent. He had allowed the opportunity to slide, and

there was no seizing upon it again. He had, to the view of the spectators, exposed himself simply as an ill-conditioned fellow, who would not accept a harmless overture to the reconciliation of a quarrel, and in his dissatisfaction with himself he had contrived somehow to chill and offend her who was dearest to him in all the world.

Since his rising that morning the whole world had been turned upside down for him. His father, however innocently, bore the brand of a convict: his mother, towards whom his whole heart moved, dared not own him for her child. The recovery of his parents—which he knew, with a sickly sense of despair in himself and of disbelief in his own human feelings and his own manly honour, should have been an unmitigated joy, was no less than a disaster.

The girl who had promised to marry him would learn the stain which lay upon his name and might turn from him, and he was discomfited by the assurance of the rascal

whom it was his plain duty to have demolished by one courageous sentence. Altogether he was comfortless and ill at ease, and but for the plain necessity of sitting out the meal he would fain have gone away to indulge his pique and unravel the web of his sorrows in silence.

Little by little the table brightened. The episode with the Count von Herder was apparently forgotten, and Hawthorne alone sat mum, and silent, staring fixedly at an epergne before him, and wondering vacantly how many years it had taken to flatten the silver noses of the cherubs who wandered round it. The rest of the function dragged wearily for him, and in the early afternoon, when the guests began to take their leave, he escaped willingly.

‘When you are ready,’ said Mrs. Barton, approaching him from the lawn.

‘I am ready,’ he said, ‘at any moment.’

There had been no opportunity for an explanation with Clara, who had held herself

aloof, and he was sore inwardly at her injustice, even whilst he admitted that he had offered her an ample justification for her conduct.

‘ Shall we go ? ’ said Mary.

‘ At once,’ he answered decidedly.

They made their adieux to their hostess, and Hawthorne boiled with indignation at the presence of Von Herder by her side.

The Count withdrew upon his approach with a certain air of superiority which galled him almost beyond endurance. Hawthorne knew that he was making a worse and worse impression upon the crowd who watched him, but he raised his hat courteously to the lady of the house, cast one wrathful look at the unshakeable Count, gave his arm to Mrs. Barton, and walked away across the lawn to the carriage which already stood in waiting on the gravel drive.

Mary saw how perturbed he was, and in her motherly heart sympathised with him

without in the least understanding the cause. She chatted on indifferent matters until they reached home, and then left Hawthorne to his own reflections.

Barton was away on business, and could not be expected until the dinner hour, and Michael, having tried in vain to see his way through the perplexities which surrounded him, having tried in vain to read, and having begun a letter to Denton which he threw aside as useless, walked out on to the lawn and threw himself into a chair in the scanty shade of a great eucalyptus. He lit a cigar and smoked furiously for a while, but his swift and vivid changes of posture displayed the disorder of his mind, and by-and-by, finding inaction intolerable, he rose and began to pace to and fro about the sward.

All the while his mother watched him from the window of her own room, seeing clearly that he was troubled, but not understanding the cause, and fearful of intruding upon him.

Hawthorne smoked one cigar furiously half through, and drawing another from his case lit it at the glowing end of the first, and went back to his rapid march again. Five minutes later he repeated this action: the sound of an opening window reached his ear without awakening his intelligence. His mother was leaning out, watching him with solicitude; but it was not until she spoke that he became aware of her presence.

‘Michael,’ she said, softly.

He turned and looked up at her with a gleaming incertitude in his eyes. He would have given the world to tell her all he knew, and to claim her sympathy; but as yet he dared not.

‘Yes,’ he answered. His voice sounded harsh and discourteous to himself, but she took no note of it. There was a sweetness in her voice which, to his mind, was almost angelic. He knew that in her inmost soul she blessed him, and he could read the yearning of affection in her eyes. The very

commonplace of her words seemed to confirm his thoughts.

‘Don’t you think you smoke too much?’ she asked.

‘Not as a rule,’ he answered; ‘but to-day I am out of temper.’

‘Come inside,’ she said, softly; ‘come to the drawing-room.’

He obeyed, and a minute later she descended and joined him.

‘I don’t think,’ she began at once, ‘that you are often out of temper, are you?’

‘Not often,’ he returned, with an attempt to smile; ‘but I have been disturbed to-day by that fellow Von Herder. He had the impertinence to address me at table. Do you know the man?’

‘No,’ she answered; ‘except that he was here the other day, I have never seen him. Have you known him long?’

‘Denton will tell you the story,’ he responded. ‘The scoundrel entered my room in the hotel in Berlin and stole all my money

and my jewellery. Denton traced the fact to him to a moral certainty, but we have no actual evidence, and we were obliged to let him go. He was positively ordered from your grounds three days back. He knows that I am fully aware of his character, and yet he has the impertinence to address me before thirty people. It was my duty to have denounced him, and yet I couldn't do it.'

'Don't fret about that,' she answered, laying a hand upon his shoulder.

'No,' he said, 'I won't fret about it.'

He took the caressing hand in both his own, shook it warmly, and began to pace up and down the room.

'He called on you this morning,' said Mrs. Barton. 'How did he dare do that after what had happened?'

Hawthorne turned, looked strangely at Mrs. Barton, and resumed his march.

'The man's impudence,' he said, 'is colossal. I have known nobody like him.'

‘I can see,’ she said, ‘that you are annoying yourself again. Sit down and be quiet.’

‘There!’ declared Hawthorne, with a forced laugh, and a wave of both hands in the air, ‘I dismiss him, he shan’t trouble me any more.’

He dropped into a seat, and she drew a chair near his own and sat down also.

‘Now,’ he said, with a sudden resolution, ‘I find myself in a strange position here, and I must bring one matter to an end.’ He hardly dared to look at her, in spite of his resolve, but he stole one glance and saw that the expression of her face was changed. There was a shrinking fear in it.

‘That man came to me,’ he declared, ‘with strange news. He came trying to blackmail me.’

‘To blackmail you?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he responded, thinking that she might not know the meaning of his words. ‘He came to extort something from me by means of a threat.’

‘A threat?’ she half whispered. ‘How could he threaten you?’

‘He threatened me,’ said Hawthorne, leaning forward with his face half-buried in his hands and his glance purposely evading the frightened search of her eyes, ‘he threatened me with the exposure of a fact in my family history.’ She gave a swift little gasp, but said nothing. He saw her hands intertwine nervously, but dared not again look at her face. ‘He told me,’ pursued Hawthorne, with a steady and monotonous voice, ‘that I was not what I supposed myself to be. He told me that my name was not what I have supposed it. He declared that he had documentary evidence, and evidence outside documents, to prove that I bore only two of the three names to which I was entitled.’ He had nerved himself for the final plunge, but at this moment Barton walked into the room with a cheery face and voice.

‘Halloa, Mary! There you are, Haw-

thorne. How did you enjoy yourselves with Mother Vincent?’

They both answered his greeting, and his wife, putting her arms about him, kissed him and glided away. Barton, oblivious of her discomposure, threw himself into a chair and fanned his face with a pocket-handkerchief, breathing upwards with a protruding underlip.

‘I’ve had a hard day of it,’ said he. ‘I should fancy as I’ve walked a matter of ten miles. I like to get a bit of exercise now and again, and it’s no fun to drive everywhere. Do you feel the heat, Hawthorne? You don’t get anything like this in Old England, eh? This is what we Sydney chaps call a seven-collar day—that’s how we measure our climate in this part of the world. On a cold day you can wear one collar from morning till night and look decent; on a warm day you want to put on two or three; on a day like this you want seven if you are to be all respectable. This is a real seven-collar day. I declare I’m boiling. I shall get off and have

a bath and then lie down until it's time to dress for dinner. Hot tap and cold shower, and then a cigar in your pyjamas. That's the way to finish a Sydney day, my lad.'

He talked on in his big deep voice with that flourishing geniality of manner he had always used to cover the tremulous affection which lay in his heart for his recovered unacknowledged child. He rose, slapped Hawthorne on the shoulders, then walked sturdily out of the room, noisily laughing, purposely to hide the emotion he could not control.

'My father!' thought Hawthorne, and sat desolately conscious that the phrase called up no such responsive feeling as he felt should have instantly attended on it. The man was from head to foot, he confessed, purposeful, honourable, affectionate, resolute, the master of himself and his surroundings, loyal--lovable, and yet not loved.

Hawthorne hated himself and despised himself because that immediate affection and esteem which, as he thought, the knowledge

of relationship should have excited did not spring to life within his breast. For his mother there was another feeling; he had loved her from the first, or almost from the first, and had thought her affection for himself, even whilst he was ignorant of its cause, infinitely touching.

At his father's exit, his mind and heart were curiously blank and empty. He was inclined to cry after him and to beg him to reveal the truth. But he thought the impulse shallow and unreal. He had been on the point of revealing his own knowledge, and now that the opportunity was taken away from him he felt that vexed emptiness which follows on a foiled emotional purpose. The confidence was broken off, and it seemed as if it could never be renewed; but even as he felt thus he heard a rustle of a dress at the door, and Mary was back again. She walked to the chair in which he sat, and with a timid hand just touched the curls which clustered on his forehead.

‘You were saying, Michael——’

‘I was saying,’ he returned, and then, lifting his face, looked her frankly in the eyes. They were full of trouble, but a dim radiance beamed in them, and in that glance her soul seemed to embrace his own; he seized both her hands, and, sliding insensibly from his seat, fell upon his knees.

‘What is it?’ she asked, in a voice half of terror, half of affection.

He fell to kissing her hand passionately, and broke into a storm of sobs. She fell upon her knees before him, he still holding both her hands in his.

‘What is it—what is it?’

He threw his arms about her neck, and pressed her to his heart—

‘Mother!’

CHAPTER XXIII

THE word swept through her spirit like a fiery wind, and she could not have told, then or afterwards, whether it brought her the keenest joy her life had known or the supremest anguish. Then a great wave of immeasurable solace and assuagement seemed to roll over her, and with her arms about her son she lifted up her voice and wept. The passion of her emotion restored Hawthorne to himself; he raised her to her feet, and led her to a couch, on which he seated himself beside her, holding her hands in his. The tears ran down her face like rain, but she looked at him with an ineffable smile, the like of which he had never seen, nor was like to see again. By-and-by they fell to drying each other's

eyes like a pair of children, and in a while they had both recovered their composure.

‘How did you know, dear?’ she whispered to him.

‘That fellow we were speaking of,’ he answered, ‘that man, Von Herder, brought me the news this morning. He showed me a copy of the certificate of my birth; he said that he had under his thumb here in Sydney the man to whom you intrusted me, and who took me to England when I was a child.’

‘John Dogdyke,’ said Mary, in a half incredulous voice.

‘That was the name,’ Hawthorne responded.

‘The man threatened you?’ his mother asked. ‘He threatened to tell the truth about you and to make you ashamed of your father and your mother? What did you tell him?’

‘I told him,’ the young man answered, with a defiant smile, ‘to go about his business.’

I refused to listen to him further, and told him he might do what he would.'

'Dear,' said his mother, speaking rapidly and with a voice which often broke and faltered, 'I'm glad you know. I've thought for many and many a year what a cruel, cruel mistake I made when I would have Tom send you away. You mustn't think we didn't love you all the while. Ah! darling, many, and many, and many a time we've lain awake at night and talked about you, and wondered what you were growing to be like. We sent you away for your own good, my dear, and you mustn't think, you mustn't, mustn't think that your mother hasn't got a mother's heart.'

She fawned on him with her hands, and her eyes appealed to him.

'I shan't think that,' he said, 'I think I know; I think I can understand.'

'You must let me tell you all the same,' she said. 'A better man than your father never lived, my dear. We were engaged to

be married at the time when his trouble began. He was charged with being at the head of a gang of poachers, but he had really gone to drive them off the land. A gentleman was shot—a young captain—and Tom was charged with shooting him. He was as innocent as the child unborn ; he told me the whole truth about the thing : but he wanted to put the wedding off till after the trial. I wouldn't hear of that, my dear, for I loved him dearly, and I made up my mind that if ever I was to have to stand by him in my life, I had to stand by him and show my faith in him then. So we got married between the petty sessions and the assizes, and then he was tried, and in spite of all Sir Ferdinand could do, and in spite of Lord Barfield and Parson Heathcote, who all gave him the best character in the world, they found him guilty and sent him to prison for seven years. After the first year they sent him out to Van Diemen's Land, and I followed him. Sir Ferdinand was a friend of

the Governor, and he wrote such letters, such kind good letters, that after a while Tom was almost allowed to have his freedom ; and then, dear, one day——’

Even in telling the story thus hastily she had awakened in her own mind all the distress and misery of that time, and she spoke under great and evident agitation ; but as the main point she desired to explain was reached her feelings became too strong for speech, and she had to pause and cry silently in Hawthorne’s arms before she could resume her story.

‘You were ill one day, and a wicked, cruel fellow, who once had Tom under his orders, and hated to know that he was going to be free and well off again, came and pretended to think that we had given shelter to some poor convict who had run away. Tom told him he was free to look over the house, but I begged him to be quiet whilst he did it, and not to wake you. I was very troubled and anxious about you,

dear, for you had been ailing for a long time, and had only just got into a nice sleep. He made all the more noise on purpose to wake you, for his only reason in coming there at all was to put us to as much trouble as he could. You woke up and began to cry, and he called you—oh, my dear! I can't—I can't speak the word.'

'Go on,' said Hawthorne, 'it's a long time ago, and it matters very little, I suppose, what he called me.'

'He called you a convict's brat, my dear,' she cried, with a new burst of tears. 'The words went to my heart, and I determined that nobody should ever speak them any more. I begged John Dogdyke to take you over to England. We thought that in a little time we'd follow you and go to America and start under a new name. Tom had you christened by his mother's maiden name of Hawthorne, and he was going to take it in America, and we were all going to live together. Darling,' she cried, suddenly, in a trans-

port of remorse and love, 'it seems so foolish and so wicked now—now you are here—that I can't understand how I ever came to do it ; and yet it was done for nothing but your good, and it broke our hearts. We needn't have kept you away, but we found that we were going to be rich, and we thought you could be reared up like a gentleman at home, and never know that there had been a stain on your father's name, and that you could be rich and happy and well looked after : and that if you didn't know about us you'd never miss us. It was all for your sake, my dear.'

'I know,' he answered, 'I am sure, I am sure of it.'

He was as absolutely certain of their affection as if it had been visibly lavished upon him all his life, and with his mother's arms around him, and her wet face pressed to his, he could tell something of the years of lonely yearning she had spent away from him.

'But what are we to do?' she asked at

last, making a final and a resolute effort to compose herself. 'If this wicked man does what he threatens, and General Mallard knows, it will bring up all the old story against Tom, and it may stop your wedding, darling. What are we to do? Can't we stop him, somehow, from doing what he threatens?'

'The man's a scoundrel!' Hawthorne cried hotly. 'He is known throughout Europe, and has come over here because every decent house on that side of the world is closed to him.'

'Yes; but, my darling,' his mother urged, 'he can hurt you here, and he can hurt Tom besides. I didn't mind that little Dogdyke when he came and threatened me, I wasn't going to be afraid of him; but I don't know about this other man. He frightens me for your sake, my dear; he's more dangerous. You mustn't lose your chance of being happy.'

'My dear mother,' Michael answered, 'to

play once into the hands of such a man is to put yourself into his power for ever. The fellow is, as I know, without shame, without pity, and without remorse. Yield to him once and he'll bleed you dry. Whatever else is to be done, I am certain of that one thing: the maddest and most foolish action we could take would be to compromise with the Count von Herder.'

'Yes, dear,' she said; 'but General Mallard?'

'General Mallard,' said Hawthorne, desperately, 'must know the truth.'

'But, Michael!' cried his mother. 'You don't guess, yet; you don't know that this General Mallard is the gentleman that was shot that dreadful night.'

Hawthorne sat silent, feeling altogether stunned by this intelligence.

'No,' he said slowly, after a long pause. 'I didn't know that. And he supposes that my father shot him?'

'No,' said his mother, eagerly, 'I don't

think he ever quite thought that. What he believed was that Tom had got a gang of poachers together to go into his father's land and shoot there just for annoyance. He never thought that Tom fired the shot, but he always thought it was through him it was fired.'

'He must know,' said Hawthorne, rising, 'and he must know at once.'

There was a film in his eyes, and his lips trembled; but his brows were drawn down to a level line of purpose, and the clenched hands and the resolute bearing of his head told their own story.

'Not yet, dear,' his mother cried, intercepting him. 'Wait. Let's think it over; let's talk it over. Shall we tell your—your father all you know?'

'Yes,' said Michael, turning his sombre eyes upon her. 'Let him know at once. I'll take the straight road here, whatever it may cost me.'

'Your father's an upright man, my dear,'

cried Mary. 'He won't ask you to do anything that isn't right ; but take his advice before you speak.'

'Very well,' he answered, 'I'll take it. Can I go and see him now?'

'No,' she answered. 'Let me break it to him.'

He assented, and with one passionate caress she left him.

Hawthorne walked to the window and stood stock still, staring straight before him and taking note of nothing. His whole world seemed that day to have tumbled about his ears ; he had no abiding-place in it any longer. He burned in resentment against Von Herder, but he found no thought for anything but pity, affection, and esteem for his newly-discovered parents. His mother he loved already, and it had seemed perfectly easy and natural from the first that he should do so. He had always been taught to think nobly of Tom Barton : the man himself, though always marked with a touch of rough-

ness and sometimes almost uncouth in manner, was obviously genuine, and but for the pitiable story which lay behind him there would have been no shame in owning him for a father.

Hawthorne had been bred in a much higher social school than that in which his parents had found their training. He was keen in spite of himself to notice their homely manners and their homely tricks in speech. But for these things he had no shame. That inward-dwelling fiend, who mocks us all with hints of our worst possible selves at moments of doubt or temptation, strove to be busy with him and to make him believe that a hundred base suggestions were his own. Hawthorne would have none of them, but stuck resolutely to the truth.

He was *not* ashamed of his new-found father and mother, and would not be; not for anything that silence could buy would he sell the pure and open loyalty he owed to Nature. The whole wide world might know the facts

if it concerned itself about them. He would, at least, go upright and unmasked—that first, let what would come afterwards. He could not feel as yet the pain of a possible separation between himself and Clara. That such a separation might ensue upon his avowal of the facts was quite evident. But he had his scorn of Von Herder and his own vigorous sense of honour to warm him, and thus the chill suggestion of danger was kept aloof.

A footstep sounded on the mosaic of the corridor without. The door of the room opened, and Tom Barton entered with an arm round his wife's waist. He was but half attired, and had thrown a dressing-gown loosely over his pyjama jacket; his hair and beard were still disordered from the bath. He turned to close the door behind him, and then, releasing Mary, marched sturdily into the middle of the room. There he stopped short and looked at Michael.

‘You’ve found us out, my lad!’ he said. Then his big voice dwindled to a husky

murmur. 'We've meant well all along, but I'm afraid we've made a muddle of it.'

Hawthorne approached him, holding out his hand.

'I am your son, sir.'

'Yes, Heaven help me,' Barton answered, with a quick click in his throat; 'you're my son.'

Hawthorne still held out his hand, and Tom, after passing the back of his own swiftly across his eyes, seized it in a vice-like grip and shook it in silence. The mother stood hovering near the pair with clasped hands, her solicitous eyes travelling from one face to the other.

'You haven't been bred like we was,' said Barton, returning, as he always did when strongly moved or excited, to the accent of his youth, 'and you've growed up not to know us. We can't expect that you should have that sort o' love for us as you might have had if you had lived with us all your life. Maybe you think it cruel and heartless

as we should have sent you away, and kept you away this three-and-twenty year. It wasn't meant for that, my lad, it wasn't meant for that; and we've found it a hard job to keep quiet, both of us, many a time.'

Michael still held his hand, but so far answered nothing.

'As you say,' Tom pursued gruffly and clumsily, 'you're my son. I don't expect you to be proud of your father, for your mother tells me somebody has told you everything; but I can look you in the face and tell you this: I never did a thing in all my days to be ashamed of. I did a plain little bit of duty at the peril of my life, and I got sent out to Van Diemen's Land for it. It's a hard thing, my lad, to look into the ways of Providence; but I make no doubt there was a purpose in it if I could only find it. What's to be done now?'

'Tell the truth, sir,' said Michael. 'That's all I mean to do.'

‘Well,’ said Tom, ‘I suppose that’s all there is to do. If we’d been plain and straightfor’ard from the first there’d never have been this mischief; but we must needs go and try to be wiser than Nature. Now, the whole story’s bound to come out again. I don’t mind for myself, but I ought never to have brought it on you, and that’s where I blame myself.’

‘That has to be taken with the rest, sir,’ said Hawthorne. ‘We shall have to make the best of it.’

‘You don’t blame me, then?’ said Barton.

‘Why should I blame you?’ Hawthorne answered.

‘That makes it feel a bit the harder somehow,’ said Tom. ‘What shall you do? Shall you wait for that threatening hound, or shall you speak at once?’

‘I shall make it my business,’ Hawthorne answered, ‘to find General Mallard at once, and I shall tell him everything. Will you go with me? He has some knowledge of you

already, and what he knows is altogether in your favour.'

'Look here, my lad,' returned Barton, tugging in gloomy perplexity at his beard. 'Suppose I go and face the racket myself? I've made the mess, I reckon, and I'm answerable for putting it straight again if straightened again it can be. Let me go and see him by myself.'

'I should [prefer, sir,' said Hawthorne, 'that we went together.'

CHAPTER XXIV

IF Hawthorne had had time or opportunity to wonder at the fact that the Count von Herder should be found at the same table with himself, he would certainly have spent at least a moment or two in the consideration of that social marvel. To his own knowledge Von Herder had been dismissed from the grounds of the Grampians, and had been sent to the right-about there with a promptitude and brusqueness which would have held back most men from the bare contemplation of a second visit.

The Count, however, with no abatement of the grand manner, had once again presented himself at the house from which he had been so ignominiously ejected. And it was pretty evident that he would not fail

to reach any bourn to which mere audacity might carry him.

How the Count had found an *entrée* into the society of Potts Point at all remained something of a mystery, even to the people who were mainly instrumental in introducing him. The process began at the Count's hotel, where he distributed a card on a genial good fellow or two, and secured thereby a casual invitation to the Union Club. Once afoot as a guest in that home of hospitality and good-fellowship, his affable foreign manners, his air of insolent distinction, his title, which at least was real, his apparent command of money, his swaggering allusions to his intimacies with the great men of Europe, secured him other invitations. He accepted all and sundry, and was in a fair way to work himself into the very best society of the place, had nobody been there to interrupt his triumphal progress.

As a matter of fact, he hardly needed Hawthorne by this time to introduce him any-

where ; but then Hawthorne knew something about him which, if repeated, would blight his chances, and the Count hailed as a quite providential occurrence the discovery of that little Tasmanian document which at first bade fair to be so useful to him. The account of the discovery of that document was, by way of a summer wonder, quite accurate. It was so curious and so complete in itself that he had positively no need to invent a lie about it.

The Count von Herder was one of those curious people who would a great deal rather embellish or distort a story than relate it as it happened within their knowledge. The mere bald unadulterated fact was rarely enough for him ; he wanted something more striking, more ingenious—something endowed with a finer aplomb than mere Nature often supplied. But in this case he felt that he could hardly embellish at all.

Here was as a positive matter of fact—the Government of an old convict island selling

its secret archives for waste paper, and thereby offering a chance to all the blackmailers in the world, the like of which was never given before in the history of the planet. English officialism has been guilty of many stupidities and cruelties in its day, but even it has never conceived and carried out with so much simplicity an act more cruel or more stupid. If the inventor of the idea that a farthing per pound for the weight of paper could compensate the Government for the crime of setting afloat its secret records be still alive, he is worthy of the compliment which is disrespectfully proffered to him in these pages. He mounted to such a height of official stupidity as has probably never before been achieved by man. Let him be welcome to that eminence.

To return to the Count von Herder. That fascinating gentleman had left behind him a wife in Europe; an unhappy, angelically-tempered woman with whom this story has no connection, beyond the mere mention of

her existence. She and her husband had long been separated, and the lady herself, with hopes destroyed, heart irrecoverably wounded, and fortune shattered, had years ago rejoined her family. Within the last year or two she had entered a lay sisterhood of the Catholic Church, withdrawing completely from the world, and striving to soothe a broken heart by the performance of works of charity.

Of all ways to fortune there is none so swift and sure as the matrimonial, if a man can but find the opportunity of entering on it. The Count von Herder was growing old. His curly, flaxen locks were getting to be a little thin at top, and the crow's feet round his eyes were deepening rapidly. Carry his youthful and insolent swagger as he might, he knew that he was growing year by year more portly ; and though he was still, in his own judgment, somewhat more than personable, he had still to confess that the years had made certain inroads upon his physical resources and aspect. He was a susceptible

wretch, was the Count, and was quite willing to fall in love with any lady who had enough money to maintain him in comfort and consideration for the rest of his days.

Bigamy would never have been a word to appal him greatly, and from Berlin to Sydney is a considerable distance. He was quite assured that the Countess von Herder would not stir from her cloistered solace to pursue him, and it was not in the least degree likely that anybody else would choose to denounce him, if he were so happy as to find a moneyed wife at the Antipodes. He had looked about him with much care, and had finally decided that no better provisioned female fortress was in sight than that under the command of Mrs. Vincent.

She was a simple and unaffected creature, just the kind of woman, as Von Herder conceived her, whom he could twist round his little finger. She was, considering her manners and her origin, absurdly wealthy, but her unfailing good nature and the down-

right affection of her simplicity had made her extremely popular. The Count was quite shrewd enough to know that with his foreign accent he might be supposed to overlook the lady's lapses in English, and if he could secure that fat, comfortable, good-natured lady as his bride, he was quite willing to accept the social consequences. Give him money and a settled footing, and he felt himself ready to go anywhere.

When the rest of the guests departed, the Count contrived to linger, and at last he was confronted only by an apoplectic wooer of the widow's, who for the last week or two had been vainly striving to screw his courage to the point of a proposal. This gentleman, whose talk was of wool and the weather, had none of the Count's social graces and none of his insolent *savoir faire*; his temper was as short as his neck, and that threatened hourly to make an end of him. There was just enough of it to threaten and no more. He strove to sit out the fascinating Count, but

his temper broke off short in the attempt, and he made his adieux cholericallly.

‘Madam,’ said the Count, when thus he found himself alone with the lady; ‘I have stayed for an object. I could not permit myself to leave your most hospitable house before I had expressed to you my profound regrets for the *contretemps* of this afternoon. I have had the slightest quarrel with that yonk gentleman, and I had supposed, after having offered due apology, that he would be as willing to forget the matter as I was.’

‘I thought he behaved very ill-tempered,’ said the lady.

‘And so did I, madam,’ said the Count. ‘But,’ he added, with his most fascinating smile, ‘I take all the blame upon myself, for I should have had more tact than to provoke an unreconciled enemy, and should have guessed that he had not yet forgiven the little accident which has wounded him. But my chief care is that I should have caused a momentary awkwardness at the table of

a hostess so charming, so cracious, so hospitable.'

With this the lady, before she quite knew what had happened, discovered that the Count's fat, white, bejewelled hand had hold of one of her own, and that he was kissing her fingers with courtly flourish and politeness. This action fluttered the innocent lady a great deal, and she hardly knew what to make of it; but the Count, rising like a very pillar of propriety, and bowing before her with outstretched hands, smiled with perfect self-possession.

'I go now, dear madam, in the hope that my explanations and apolochy are accepted.'

'Oh yes, Count,' said the lady; 'you can be quite sure of that. I think the young man behaved, as I said, most ill-tempered.'

'Do not bestow upon him too sefere a censure, dear madam,' implored Von Herder; 'don't let me see that so charming and cracious a lady can be implagable.'

The poor, good, innocent creature had

never been talked to in this way before, and on the whole, though it fluttered her a good deal, she thought it rather agreeable than otherwise.

‘May I pelieve,’ asked the Count, ‘that I may be permitted to enjoy in continuance the frientship which has already begun between us?’ The lady blushed furiously and bridled feebly. ‘May I,’ asked the Count, seizing her hand and raising it with that noble and imposing flourish of his once more to his lips, ‘may I be permitted to have the honour once to gall again upon you?’

‘Oh,’ said the lady, ‘I shall always be pleased to meet the Count von Herder.’

‘Thank you, thank you, dear madam,’ the Count returned; and so, with smiling bows and flourishes, departed, taking his way to his hotel.

An hour later, as fortune would have it, Mrs. Vincent, driving with a friend, met the Count point-blank. He had gone out to perform some little commission for himself, and,

having given his order to the tradesman he had visited, had strolled back to the hotel entrance at that moment. He raised his hat with a noble gesture, and the foolish creature admired him with all her simple heart. The continental manner, which in Count von Herder was, perhaps, a little exaggerated, had not been in vogue among the men with whom Mrs. Vincent had been familiar, and there was something altogether splendid about it which impressed her greatly.

The Count, with his heels together, his chest inflated and his head erect, stood with his hat lifted at arm's length, and the perfect aplomb of his manner, the serene self-confidence which beamed in his smile, saved the attitude from the sense of burlesque which might have touched it if it had been attempted by the average citizen. The widow drove away with that majestic figure in her mind, and found in it an agreeable theme for contemplation.

This encounter was witnessed by a gentle-

man who stood half-way between the hotel door and the gate which led from the pavement to its narrow strip of front garden. He was a personage of the raffish sporting type, very tightly and trimly dressed, and wearing cuffs and collar of formidable size. He had very thin legs, and the extreme tautness of his attire set off their tenuity to some disadvantage, forcing his white spatter-dashes and big patent leather shoes into undue prominence. He smoked a cigar, wore his shining silk hat tilted forward and on one side, and carried the tips of his fingers jauntily in his waistcoat pocket to give full display to the rings with which his hands were decorated. This gentleman was, in his own way, to the full as self-satisfied as the Count himself, and his whole attitude and expression indicated broadly his own belief that he was a match for anybody.

The Count swept back his hat to its place upon his head with a gesture almost as large and noble as that with which he had removed

it, and swinging majestically round, made for the gateway. As he did so, he met the other's smiling eye, and for a mere half second paused. The colour fled from his cheek, and his glance changed from triumph to rage. The change was quick, and his recovering of himself was so rapid that only a keen observer would have noticed it. He smiled again, and, stepping a little aside to avoid the raffish-looking gentleman, he waved a hand of genial recognition to him. The other, without moving from his place, drew his bejewelled white right hand from the pocket in which it had reposed and offered it. The Count accepted it and shook it heartily.

‘We shall meet py and py, my tear fellow,’ he said, and half resumed his walk, with the look of a man who, in the midst of urgent pressure of affairs, had still a moment to spend upon a friend.

‘How d’ye do, Von H.?’ said the other, detaining his hand. ‘How d’ye do?’ He was distinctly waggish and triumphant, and

the Count, smiling in answer to his smile, looked as if he would willingly have done him personal violence.

‘Ant you? Ant you, my tear fellow?’ he asked. ‘You are quite vell? So glad. So glad.’ He saw that his friend meant to detain him, and made no further effort to get away.

‘I knew you would be!’ said the newcomer, with a dry, knowing smile. ‘I was certain of it.’

His cigar was cocked impudently in one corner of his clean-shaven lips, and he had a knack of making its end describe little slow circles in the air, which, coupled with a smile, gave him an aspect of ineffable knowingness. He bent his knees and straightened them again, still holding the Count’s hand in his friendly grip, and still smiling in superb appreciation of his own cunning and his own swagger, and everything that was his. He was twenty years younger than the Count, and, in comparison with that gentleman, he

looked smaller than he really was, but weight and seniority seemed to have no value for him.

‘Ven dit you come here?’ Von Herder asked him. ‘I hat no itea you were here.’

‘What a pleasure it is to surprise a friend,’ returned the raffish gentleman. ‘Ain’t it, Von H.? I got here at midday. Just landed from the boat, and had time to dress, to pick a bit, and to make a few inquiries.’

‘Come and vinish your cika in my rooms,’ cried the Count. ‘I have an hour before I need to tress for tinner. Come, my tear fellow.’

‘Yes, Von H.,’ the dear fellow answered. ‘I’m coming. Don’t you think I ain’t coming, Von H., because you’d be doing me a sad injustice, and you wouldn’t like that, would you?’

‘This way, my tear boy,’ said the Count, all affable and warm. ‘I don’t know ven I haf been so glad to see anybody.’ There were half-a-dozen men in the hotel who had

just emerged from some side apartment, and in their presence and hearing the Count was delighted to have met this unexpected friend. 'Now, vy didn't you write ant say that you were coming?' he demanded, slapping his companion on the shoulder. 'Come up to my rooms and haf a chat together. Not?'

The unexpected friend made no answer, but, edging his way through the little crowd, followed the Count's footsteps, smiling still. Arrived on the first-floor landing, Von Herder threw open a door and entered a private sitting-room. He walked from this into an adjoining bedchamber, and, having locked the outer door of that apartment, returned. His unexpected friend, with his hat still cocked, his cigar in his mouth, and the tips of his fingers in his waistcoat pockets, swaggered tranquilly after him into the sitting-room. The Count laid his hat upon the table and faced him.

'And now, perhaps,' he said, 'you will tell me vot the devil you vant here?'

‘Yes, Von H.,’ returned the other, ‘I’ll tell you what the devil I want here, with pleasure. I’m a moderate man, and I don’t feel disposed to ask for anything that isn’t fair and just and reasonable between partners. You know that, Von H., old fellow, don’t you? Halves is my idea. What d’ye say to halves, Von H.? I’ll take more if you feel inclined to be generous, but I don’t ask for it.’

‘Ant what do you mean by halfes?’ inquired the Count, scowling down upon him. The new arrival had thrown himself negligently into a chair, where he sat with his big feet and thin legs widely extended, his hat in a new rakish attitude, and his gemmed fingers still in his waistcoat pockets. In the extremity of his waggish joy and triumph he had screwed up one eye, whilst a double share of mirth and cunning twinkled in the other.

‘You don’t mean to tell me that you can’t do compound division, Von H.?’ he answered

smilingly. 'I shouldn't believe you, if you did. I should set it down to that modesty of yours. Because you are a modest man, Von H., ain't you? Halves is halves. Half five thousand is two thousand five hundred. Fancy having to give a chap like you a lesson in arithmetic! But I shan't make any charge for it, though I suppose I ought to in strict justice to myself. Two thousand five hundred is the figure. Pretty figure too, ain't it, Von H.? The sort of figure a man likes to put his arm round. The sort of figure a man can enjoy a dance with, ain't it, Von H.?'

'You are bleased to be fazetious,' said the Count.

'So I am, Von H., so I am,' returned his visitor. 'But you ain't, are you? You're going to be business-like, of course. It's a queer thing, ain't it? But the cove that's got to pay never looks as chirpy as the bloke that trousers the spondulicks. Does he, Von? I ain't a notice-taking infant as a rule, but I've looked at that and wondered at it many a time.'

‘You ask me for dwo thousand fife hundret bounds?’ the Count demanded.

‘And you’re going to say you haven’t got it. There’s your modesty again. Don’t hide your wealth and blush to find it fame. Don’t hide your good heart and pretend that I ain’t welcome to the money. Because I am, you know. Welcome as the flowers in June. Ain’t I, Von H.?’

‘If I had my vay, my yonk frient,’ said Von Herder, darkening more and more above him, ‘do you know vot I should do?’

‘Ah!’ returned the other, triumphantly admiring him. ‘You’d most likely adopt me, and see that I was brought up nice and proper. You wouldn’t let me contaminate myself with German adventurers, and that kind of people, would you, Von H.?’

‘If I had my vay, my yonk frient,’ the Count repeated, ‘do you know vot I should do?’

‘I’m sure you’d be a father to me. But don’t let us waste time in being affectionate,

old chap. I know, Lord love you! Your heart's good for anything, but your hands are tied, ain't they, Von H.?'

'Yes, my charming and fazetious frient, my hands are tied. But you know my sentiments, eh?'

'We'll stick together for this evening, won't we?' said the Count's young friend. 'We'll have a bit of dinner together, and we'll go to the theatre together, and in the morning we'll go to the bank together.'

'I am encaged this efening,' said the Count.

That's exactly where it is, Von H.,' his companion returned. 'You are encaged, and you won't be let out till morning. Come, old chap, we'll enjoy ourselves together.'

CHAPTER XXV

MR. DENTON, returning unexpectedly early from his up-country engagement, arrived in Sydney that same evening, at about eight o'clock. He was a little out of temper by reason of the fact that the business which had drawn him away from Barton's house had proved to be not worth following. He had been expecting that some sort of complication would arise from Hawthorne's presence there, and had seriously wished to be at hand in any emergency.

He had gone away with misgivings in pursuit of what had seemed urgent matter, and had been grieved to go. It was doubly annoying to discover that he might with actual advantage to himself have stayed behind. He had determined to seek an hotel

for dinner, and to go to the Grampians afterwards, and he was walking down George Street, with a small black valise in his hand, when the sight of a face he had not beheld for a year or two brought him to a half standstill. The owner of the face was sauntering along on the opposite side of the street, and was resplendently attired in lavender-coloured kid gloves, lavender-coloured silk dust coat, and evening dress. He was not satisfied with these splendours by themselves, but topped them all with a tall white hat, which he wore at a considerable angle. In the breast of the shirt he wore a great solitaire, which might have been diamond of Brazil or Paris.

This gentleman was evidently well content with himself, and was walking slowly with an easy swagger, when, at the very moment at which Denton recognised him, he turned his head to command a view of the opposite side of the street, and recognised Denton. He, too, came to a sort of half-stop, and then,

by an apparently mutual instinct, they advanced to meet each other diagonally across the road. Denton dropped his head a little, and caressing his shaven chin in the gloved fingers of the unoccupied hand, advanced as if he would have gone by without further sign of recognition. But when within a yard of the personage in evening dress, he cocked up to him an eye so shrewdly humorous that it brought the man to a dead standstill.

‘H’m!’ said Denton; ‘you’re here, are you?’

‘Yes,’ said the man in evening dress; ‘I’m here.’ He bent his knees as he spoke, and straightened them again with a pretentious but uneasy-looking sort of swagger.

‘I thought it not unlikely that you might follow,’ Denton returned; ‘I don’t tell tales out of school; but I should advise you not to stay too long.’

‘A day or two, Mr. Denton,’ said the other, with all pretence of swagger suddenly

beaten out of him. 'A mere private business, Mr. Denton ; nothing else in the world.'

'So long as it is not professional,' Denton answered, 'it's no affair of mine. Don't let it be professional, Mr. Whateley. I should advise you not to let it be professional, or I might have to interfere.'

'I will remember what you say, sir,' said the other ; and at Denton's nod walked on.

It took him a minute or two to recover even the outward seeming of easy majesty he had worn when Denton first observed him, and even then, when he paused to light a cigar in the street, and went through the movements with much squaring of the elbows and proud adjustment of his chin in his high collar, his face was paler than it had been ; there was a little dry tick in his cheek, and his hand trembled.

'The matter has nothing especial to do with me,' Denton murmured to himself, as he walked on ; 'but everybody, more or less, is guardian to the body politic.'

He turned and looked after the man he had accosted, and saw him engaged in apparently animated converse with no less a person than the Count von Herder. The Count was also in evening dress, and was much more magnificent and imposing in it than his companion. The young man tapped him emphatically once or twice upon the shoulder, and Denton, smiling drily, made a guess.

‘He’s telling the other blackguard that I’m here,’ he thought. ‘But then, the other blackguard knows it.’ With that he walked on serenely, valise in hand, his eyes bent upon the pavement, and an occasional smile twinkling in his eyes or twitching at the corner of his lips. Suddenly he was hailed.

‘Denton—the very man I want!’

He looked up, and there was Barton before him, with a face in which he could read a strange excitement. Hawthorne was a yard behind, and a single step brought him to a level with Barton.

‘What is the matter?’ asked the eminent

jurist. 'You look a little troubled, both of you.'

'I'd sooner have you here at such a time as this,' said Barton, 'than any other man I know. I want to have a serious talk with you. Come along, we'll find some sort of shandrydan, and drive home together.'

'I haven't dined,' said Denton. 'Come to my old hotel. I can get a private room, and we can talk there.'

It was so arranged, and in a few minutes the three were closeted together.

'Now, what is it?' Denton asked, taking an arm-chair, and nursing one lean knee in both his hands.

'The whole truth's out, Denton,' said Barton. 'Michael knows everything.'

'Ah!' returned Denton, with remarkable dryness. 'Michael knows everything, does he? H'm, I guessed he would; and what do you propose to do now that Michael knows everything?'

'I propose,' said Hawthorne, surprised by

the dryness of his old guardian's tone, and slightly wounded by the indifference it seemed to convey—'I propose at once to take the news to General Mallard. That seems to me a clear duty.'

Barton took up the story.

'We went to look for Mallard, and we found him away for a day. The young lady is staying at Government House. Now you know, Denton, I look on that as a sort of a Providence; it's an interruption that may come in useful, don't you see? I want you to turn it over in your mind. Here's Michael been saying that he'd trust your advice, if you were here, where he won't listen to mine. He's for doing everything hotfoot, as I was at his time of life. Now tell us what you think about it.'

'Let me know about what I am to think, to begin with,' Denton answered. 'I may tell you,' he added, looking up through his grey eyebrows, 'that I expected some such folly as this as the result of your invitation.'

This,' he added, emphatically, releasing his knee and seizing his gold-rimmed eye-glass and tapping with it upon an outstretched forefinger, 'this is what I anticipated—what I anticipated,' he repeated angrily.

Barton was too simply in earnest to catch fire at Denton's spark of temper. 'If you suppose,' he answered, 'that either Michael's mother or me spoke any word about the subject, you are mistaken. He never heard a word about it from either of us.'

Denton looked up at this with a gleam of astonishment, and the swift tapping of the eyeglass on the outstretched finger ceased.

'That rascal, Von Herder,' said Hawthorne, 'has the certificate of my birth. He has got full information about my early career from a man named Dogdyke, to whom I was intrusted years ago.'

'And he comes to blackmail?' said Denton.

'It amounts to the same thing,' Haw-

thorne answered. 'He demands that I shall introduce him into good society in Sydney. He demands that I shall present him to the Governor as an old European friend of mine, and give him the advantage of my credentials here.'

'A very modest and moderate demand, indeed,' replied Denton, drily. 'Why don't you agree to it?'

'Well, sir,' said Hawthorne, 'we both know enough about the fellow.'

'Yes,' said Denton, with his dry smile. 'We both knew something of the fellow. Leave him to me.'

'What do you advise that I should do, sir?' asked Hawthorne.

'For the present,' Denton answered, 'nothing. Leave the man to me.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' said Hawthorne, warmly. 'It is not a question of any power that may be exerted over the Count von Herder. It is not a question whether he can be stopped from making the exposure he

threatens. It is a question of personal honour on my own part. I must make the facts known to General Mallard. He proposes to take me into his family ; he accepts me under a certain belief as to my own family belongings ; and I can see nothing for it but that he should know the truth.'

'My dear Michael,' returned Denton, 'a sense of personal honour is a very fine thing, indeed ; but let me ask you for a moment to consider what you propose to do. Nay, hear me, if you please, and then you shall be as eloquent as you like when I have done. There's your father—a man, to the very best of my belief, who has suffered a wrong as undeserved as ever fell to any man within the scope of my knowledge or my reading. I believe him all his life to have been a good and dutiful citizen, and I know him, as well as one man can know another, to be a man of incorruptible honour !'

'Thank you, Denton, thank you,' said Barton.

Denton went on drily, with his forefingers crossed together, his chin perked upwards, and his glance shifting keenly from one face to the other. The two men stood side by side above him, and he sat hunched up in his arm-chair, with his head thrown back to survey them. His words were strong enough, but his manner was one of unspeakable dryness.

‘You have a mother,’ he continued, bending his regard solely upon Hawthorne, as he spoke these words, ‘as good, as true, and as kind a soul as sweetens this world at this hour. She’s suffered great pains; she’s lived to see the man whom she married, in perfect confidence of his innocence, found guilty of a crime in which he had no hand at all; she has followed that man into his exile; she has shared the misery of a convict’s lot. Providence has seen fit to lift her from that state, to draw a cloud of complete forgetfulness across the past; to establish her in a social position which she could never in her

earlier days have hoped to reach to. She has made a lifelong sacrifice of her maternal affections for your sake—and now, what happens? You propose, for the satisfaction of your personal honour, to bring back upon your father the unmerited shame from which he has escaped for years and years : you propose anew to inflict that unmerited shame upon your mother. Now, it seems to me that is not at all your business in the world. By accident this secret has been brought home to you by a scoundrel who wants to profit by his possession of it. I advise you to leave that scoundrel to me, and to spare your parents the new trouble you had meant to bring upon them.'

Michael sat down in the nearest chair, and, laying his face in his hands, groaned softly to himself. Barton was about to speak, but Denton with one of his old flashes of vehemence waved a sudden and vivid hand against him. He obeyed the gesture, and kept silence. For a long time nobody spoke,

and then Michael looked up, and in a disturbed voice said :—

‘ I confess, Mr. Denton, that I had not thought of these things.’

‘ In a case like this,’ said the old barrister, drily, ‘ there are many things to think of. This is a complex world, Michael, and life is full of Gordian knots, which are not painlessly to be severed by the sword. In this case, as you see, the knot has intertwined with it the nerves of human people who ought to be very dear to you.’

‘ I don’t know as they ought, Denton,’ said Barton, stoutly, though his voice quivered; ‘ I don’t know as they ought. I know what Mary will think about it, and I know what I think.’

‘ Will you hold your stupid Quixotic tongue?’ Denton snapped at him. ‘ You’ve no right to know what Mary will think about it. Hasn’t she suffered enough for both your sakes already? Leave this matter alone. Let me handle it. You will, if you are wise.

My dear young friend, there is a certain personage to whom we are obliged to hold a candle. You are young and he's hateful to you, and you have beliefs which one of these days your experience of the world may modify. You are too proud to illuminate the steps of the person I refer to, even by so much as a splutter of a lucifer match. I am willing to supply him with a whole torch-light procession if I could lead him to his own place of residence. At least,' he concluded, changing his manner completely, and leaning forward to lay one hand on Hawthorne's knee, 'do nothing in a hurry. Leave the man to me. Let's hold counsel about the whole matter. There's no immediate necessity for action. Let's take eight-and-forty hours to think.'

For the time being Denton's argument seemed unanswerable to Hawthorne. He asked himself with a poignant bitterness what right he had to shame the mother of whose lifelong love he was already so abso-

lutely assured? What right had he to bring back to his father the shame out of which he had gallantly struggled? And yet he could not disguise from himself the facts on the other side which he had seen so clearly first of all. To allow himself to drift, to make no protest, and to leave the whole matter in the hands of Denton, looked easy enough, but at the same time it looked shameless.

Denton might very well have influence and nous enough to banish the Count von Herder, and even, perhaps, the power to close his lips for ever. But supposing that the facts should at some future time become known, how could he then face his accusers? Suppose that at some future time General Mallard should discover that he had given his daughter into the hands of the son of a convict! It was beyond his power as an honest man to say that he had not been aware of the blight upon his birth. Circumstances might conspire at any hour to republish the whole story, and in that case he must

stand branded as a pretender, and would be incapacitated for defence. I should be doing the young man's thoughts poor justice if I offered these as their groundwork. They were really nothing more than the fringe. They represented, and represented only, the prudential reasons against the course which was urged upon him; the real objects lay far deeper.

His whole soul recoiled from the position in which he involuntarily found himself. At the very basis of his love lay that sense of worship which, in the heart of an ardent boy, is the best, noblest, and the most purifying part of that passion which is, after all, when the poets and the dramatists and the romancists have done their worst with it, the most ennobling and vivifying of all.

To take Clara Mallard's hand with that implied, unspoken lie in his heart, seemed intolerable and impossible. He could not dream of himself as meeting her, whom he regarded as the ideal of honour and of purity,

under such conditions. The Gordian knot was everywhere complete ; to sever it by the rude action he had at first proposed was, in Denton's language, to lay bare the living nerves of a father and mother who had already suffered without desert, and suffered nobly. To solve it by retiring from his engagement would be to break his own heart, and to leave a gangrene in that of the woman he worshipped, which might, perhaps, never be healed till death. To hide the truth was to come to the altar of all sacredness and purity with a lie on his lips. The position seemed, look at it how he might, from every side, impregnable ; and yet, somehow, it was necessary to find a way to escape it.

CHAPTER XXVI

WHEN, on that eventful evening, which was crowded with absorbing interest for so many people, the Count von Herder left his hotel in company with his newly recovered acquaintance, that gentleman calmly abstracted the key from the door of the Count's bedroom, turned it in the lock from the outside, and put it in his own pocket.

‘And now, Von H.,’ he declared, with that vivaciously triumphant air which had characterised him from the beginning of their encounter, ‘we have locked up the gaol, we are both on the outside of it, and I reckon I can give you your liberty. I’m going to the theatre; I’m told there’s a stunning little extravaganza going, and I’m off to see it.

You can go if you like, but if you don't like you needn't. I ain't going to be hard on you, Von H., because, dearly as you love my society, you might have something else to do than charm yourself with it this evening; and so you're free.'

'Fery goot,' said the Count, who, notwithstanding the fact that he had partaken of a very passable dinner, and had drunk a bottle of very passable wine, was still in an extremely evil humour. The Count loved the pleasures of the table, and at the festive board generally showed at his best and his most amiable. To-night, however, his ordinary conversational faculties had been missed by his companion, and his ordinary excellent appetite seemed to have deserted him.

'You,' said Von Herder, ungraciously, 'may take your roat and I vill take mine.' The younger man stood still in the hotel corridor with his hand resting on the chamber key in his pocket, and sang waggishly, in a

voice of considerable delicacy and sweetness :—

And ye'll tak' the high road,
And I'll tak' the low,
But——

And there he deserted the melody, and suddenly drawing the key from his pocket poked the Count in the waistcoat with the end of it, and added, 'I'll be in Scotland before you.'

The Count scowled in response, and walked away ; but encountering in the vestibule someone with whom he had a bowing acquaintance, contorted his features into a smile, and left the hotel flourishing his cigar in one hand, and twirling a light walking cane in the other, as if he had no such thing as a care upon his mind. His tormentor and captor strolled out after him, and after watching his noble figure for a minute or two, followed at leisure.

The Count, who had crossed to the other side of the road, saw Mr. Denton approaching,

and not being especially anxious to meet him, walked into a shop to make an improvised inquiry, and so escape the rencontre. When his pursuer's interview with Denton was over, that young gentleman made haste after him, and used almost the words Denton had in his own mind divined. He introduced an unflattering epithet or two, but the gist of the sentiment remained.

‘Well,’ said the Count, ‘what is that to me? I’ve known that for tays and tays. You may not care to have Mr. Denton know of your whereabouts; to me it is as nothing.’

‘I ain’t so sure of that, Von H.,’ returned the other, taking him by the arm. ‘We’ll see. I don’t care to talk about this kind of matter in the street, but we’ll have it out between us before the night’s over. We can just hurry things up in the morning, and then I think I’ll have a look at New Zealand. I’ve always had an eye for picturesque scenery, haven’t I, Von H.? You have, too. You are fond of it now, ain’t you? Your spirit

leaps when you behold a rainbow in the sky, don't it, Von? Or a peeler coming round the corner is an object full of interest to you and me, ain't it?'

'I should tesire you to understand me very glearly, my yonk frient,' said the Count, lookingly sombrely down at him. 'I am sick of this persiflage, and I promise you that I shall not long endure it.'

Perhaps Mr. Whateley's spirits, high as they had been, were a little reduced by his recent interview with Denton, or, perhaps, impudent as he was, he read something in Von Herder's glance and tone which taught him moderation. At any rate, he added, in a manner which the Count felt to be less offensive, 'All right, old chap; I'm your man for any kind of pace, fast or slow.'

'Slow down entirely,' said the Count, conscious of his triumph, and determined not to lose the effect of it, 'I should atfise you.'

'Look here, Von H.' said the other, 'I can't bear to be gloomy. If you are not

disposed for fun, I am. If you like to go and enjoy yourself by yourself, I can stroll back to the hotel, and keep an eye on things; I ain't particular.'

'And why do you want to go back to the hotel?' asked the Count. And why do you want to keep an eye on things?'

'Well, you see,' said Mr. Whateley, 'you're so thoughtless. If you'll let me say so, you're so inconsiderate. You might find out you'd lost that key and get the landlord to open the door. You might drive off nobody knows where; you might catch the steamboat; you might do almost anything.'

Whatever momentary advantage the Count von Herder had gained was lost again. He surrendered, but surrendered with an ill grace, and walked to the theatre in silence.

'Look here, Von H.,' said Mr. Whateley, 'I'll do the thing in style for you; I'm expecting to come into a little bit of money to-morrow. I'm not particularly flush this minute, but I have enough. I'll tell you

what I'll do with you. I'll pay for a box, and we'll spend the night quite proper and pretty.'

The Count offering no opposition to this scheme, the younger man secured a box, and being shown into it, they took their places side by side. Evening dress at the theatre is not so inevitable a thing in the colonies as in England. The two gentlemen, each with his hired opera-glass, leaning forward from the *loge*, and scanning the house with that peculiar assurance of insolence with which many people seem to be gifted in strange places, though they show no sign of it at home, were naturally objects of regard. An ostrich-feather fan fluttered vigorously in the box opposite to that in which they sat, and the Count, adjusting his glasses to look in that direction, recognised his hostess of the afternoon. He beamed and bowed, and his salute was acknowledged. The lady had but a female companion, who shrank into the dusk, and seemed unwilling to display herself.

The curtain was up already, and the last notes of the opening chorus filled the house. The Count, rising from his seat, but leaving his opera hat and dust cloak behind him, left the box, and presently reappeared in that occupied by Mrs. Vincent. Mr. Whateley, leaning back in his place, gave himself over more completely to the observation of the lady than of the stage. She wore a wealth of jewellery, arranged and chosen with no special taste, but, as Mr. Whateley thought, if it were real the wearer might be well worth running away with, if it were only for the purpose of pawning her. He saw that Von Herder was extremely attentive and polite, and that the lady received his attentions with every mark of consideration. She seemed, indeed, a little overcome by the Count's magnificent presence, and simpered and bridled under the eyes of one unobserved spectator a little more than that spectator thought altogether necessary. 'I suppose she's worth catching,' he muttered to himself, 'or old Von

wouldn't have troubled to catch her. Anyway, if he chooses, she's caught.'

Having once arrived at this conclusion, he turned his seat, and devoted himself to the contemplation of the scene behind the footlights, contenting himself with an occasional glance across the house to make sure of Von Herder's continued presence there. The second act was approaching its conclusion when the smiling young man in the box suddenly froze again: he had discovered Denton's presence in the stalls. The little high-dried old gentleman, with a programme in his hands, was making pretence to read it. He was turned slightly in Mr. Whateley's direction, and between the edge of his programme and his beetling brows his eyes just visibly twinkled, fixed on the solitary occupant of the box. The eyebrows raised themselves as Denton caught the young man's glance, expressing a sort of casual 'May I?' Denton rose, slid deftly past the rigid or yielding knees of the occupants of the row in which he

had found a place, and disappeared. By-and-bye there was a tap at the door of the box, and Mr. Whateley opened it. A stranger went by at that moment, and the young man took momentary advantage of his presence.

‘How do you do, Denton? Awfully glad to see you. Come in, there’s plenty of room.’ He spoke smilingly and with a cheerful voice; but as the stranger disappeared and Denton closed the door behind him his visage assumed a less cheerful expression, and he added in a doleful voice, ‘Charming little piece, ain’t it?’

‘A charming piece,’ said Denton. ‘I remember telling you a year or two ago—how long is it, by the way?—three years last April—how mistaken a course it always is to attempt to fog an advocate. If you had given me your complete confidence I should have had less difficulty in getting you out of the clutches of the law than I experienced, and it is quite possible that I should not have found it necessary to disturb you now.’

Mr. Whateley's whole manner underwent a change. Not only the aspect of his face but the character of his voice was altered. The gay and flippant personage who had triumphed over Von Herder earlier in the afternoon had disappeared, and in his place sat a young man whose eye was furtive, whose clean-shaven face was downcast, and whose voice, instead of expressing a sense of that fashionable, easy disregard of social restraint which at this time mark so many of our gilded youth, was constrained and hang-dog. His voice took a husky note, not unreminiscent of lower cockneydom; in short, this young man needed but to have been close cropped by the shears of the prison barber to afford a very average personation of the cleverer type of cockney thief; and this amazing change was wrought simply by the abolition of a manner foreign to him and the substitution for it of a manner native.

‘I am ’ere on private business, Mr. Denton,’ he said, ‘and nothink else, I do

assure you, on my word of honour !' His very accent was gone. Had he been talking to Von Herder in the freedom of his triumph he would have said, 'I'm yaw.' Talking to Denton, he began, 'I'm 'ere.' Face, voice, accent, manner, all visibly and audibly deteriorated before the dreadful old gentleman's quiet gaze.

'Exactly,' said Denton. 'What is your name at present?'

'Whateley,' said the young man, gazing suspiciously about him. 'David Whateley.'

'David?' said Denton, questioningly; 'David will do. David is as good as James, no doubt, and perhaps the disguise is sufficient. A possible criminal brother with a strong personal resemblance might explain much for an inconvenient inquirer. And you're here on private business?'

'I'm on private business, Mr. Denton; nothing else, s'elp me.'

'Now,' pursued Denton, with a crossed forefinger and that sidelong inquiring eye which

had brought help or terror to the breasts of many hundreds in the course of the old gentleman's professional career, 'if you had been quite open with me in the April of three years ago, and had not compelled me to find out a great many things for myself, Mr. Whateley, I should have been bound by the ordinary rules of my profession, and should have been compelled to respect your confidence; but you were not open and above-board, and you chose rather that I should find out things for myself than that you should expose them to me voluntarily. Now, that lands you, do you see, in rather an awkward predicament at present!'

'I do assure you, Mr. Denton,' returned the young man, 'that if I can be of service to you in any way——'

'You have hit the nail upon the head,' Denton answered. 'I shall expect you to be of service. I shall expect you to call upon me to-morrow, and I shall have certain inquiries to make of you. Fail me, and it will

be so much the worse for you ; try to deceive me, and it will again be so much the worse for you. I think we understand each other.'

'Thank you, sir,' said Mr. Whateley.

'You will be good enough to notice my address. I'm staying with Mr. Barton, at the Grampians, Potts Point. You will remember that, if you please.'

'Yes, sir,' said Mr. Whateley. 'I'll remember it.'

'Repeat it, if you please,' said Denton.

Mr. Whateley humbly repeated, 'Care of Mr. Barton, the Grampians, Potts Point.'

'That will do,' said Mr. Denton. 'Ten o'clock to-morrow.'

'I beg your pardon, sir,' cried Mr. Whateley, appealingly ; 'it's a matter of almost life and death to me, sir. If you could anyway put it as late as twelve, or even half-past, I shall feel obliged to you.'

'Very good, Whateley,' said Denton, with a dry smile, directed at the other side of the house, which seemed, though it really meant

nothing at all, to express a diabolical cunning and understanding of the situation to Mr. Whateley's mind. 'Very well, we'll say half-past twelve. You will ask for me, and I will be at home to you. Don't trouble to rise, Mr. Whateley, and, above all, don't be such a fool as to try to evade me.'

'You may depend on that, sir,' was the answer, and Denton, rising, waved the other back when he would have intercepted him in opening the door, and quietly left the theatre.

'The game goes well,' he said to himself, as he marched down the street. 'I think that that should mean checkmate to our friend Von Herder.'

CHAPTER XXVII

MR. DOGDYKE had visions of the most delightful and flattering kind, and when he had penned his note to Mrs. Barton, and followed it up in person, he had been fully persuaded that he had only to ask, to hint his power, and to have. He had looked on the modest little five hundred pounds for which he had tendered a request, as being almost a certainty. The idea that Mrs. Barton should refuse to be blackmailed had never occurred to him except to be scoffed at. She and Tom Barton were eminently respectable nowadays, and their past had fallen into complete oblivion. The deeper it had sunk out of sight the less likely, so Mr. Dogdyke argued, they were to be willing to have it drawn back to the surface and exposed to the gaze of a public

which was always eager for scandal. And this five hundred pounds, though it had come to mean a very great deal to Dogdyke, meant very little to people who were so wealthy as the Bartons. They could easily have afforded to pension him for life, and he was fully persuaded that their duty lay in that direction.

When he left the house with a solitary bank-note for one pound in his possession, and shook his fist at the illuminated glass door, he was hardly aware of the full extent of that passion of righteous wrath which possessed him. The offer of employment which Mrs. Barton had made to him looked like an insult, open, flagrant, and intentional.

Dogdyke had already tried labour, and had come to the conclusion that he had had enough of it. He had been Barton's social superior in the old days in Van Diemen's Land. He had magnificently lent him the light of his countenance; had generously allowed his wife to consort with Mrs. Barton, and had exulted with all the feelings of a conscious patron.

This fact alone made it difficult for him to descend to the level of one of Barton's employés ; and there were reasons apart which made labour in Barton's service peculiarly distasteful to him. Tom, though one of the most generous of men, was not only himself a hard worker, but insisted that everybody about him should work hard also, and he had certain habits of punctuality which were galling to a man of Dogdyke's temperament even to witness.

In short, to Dogdyke's apprehension, Barton was a tyrant of a most unrighteous kind. He expected a man to be at the office at ten o'clock in the morning, and, with an hour's miserable interval for the mid-day meal, to work till four, and to keep at least moderately hard at it all the time. There had been a period in Dogdyke's career when he would have seen less hardship in this condition of things than he now discovered ; but in the interim he had been his own master, and had fallen first of all into a habit of driving himself very leisurely, and latterly into a habit of not

driving himself at all ; so that a return to the fetters of labour was full of the bitterest pains and penalties. Then, again, Barton was a rigidly sober man, and in this respect, too, required that people in his employment should conform to his own habits and opinions. It is probable that as a mere matter of theory Dogdyke would have agreed with him on this point, but the wretched little man had contracted habits of constant over-indulgence, and occasional open intemperance, which were hard to break.

A few years of irresponsible prosperity had been the ruin of him, as they have been the ruin of scores of thousands before him. Always to have gone in harness, always to have had a master whose orders he was compelled to obey, would have left him a not altogether unworthy member of society. He had never meant to do anybody harm in his life, but he had broken his wife's heart, he had ruined a long-established and prosperous city business, and brought himself to the

position of a hungry hanger-on—the incarnation of greedy envy of the goods of others. Now, with a rooted appetite for luxury of a sort, an equally rooted objection to labour, and a burning sense of the ingratitude of the world, he was turned loose with a one-pound Bank of New South Wales note and a sixpence between himself and the lower depths of poverty. He felt it to be cruel, and could almost have wept for commiseration of himself had not his wrath against ingratitude sustained him.

He vowed, between the hall door and the gate of the grounds, that he would never again be guilty of a generous action. Perhaps he might have saved himself the trouble of that declaration; but that view of the case did not occur to him. He did not dare to face his lodgings, where an exigent landlady awaited him. He had put her off until that evening with flourishing assurance of certainty. He had himself been so secure of hope, that he had little difficulty in assuming a conquering manner with her; but the

woman's own affairs had become pressing, and he had been forced to an actual promise. To have offered her the one-pound note, in pretence of even partially satisfying her claim, would have been futile ; and, apart from that, he wanted it for himself. He had spent the whole day in screwing his courage to the sticking point, and he had not yet dined.

Potts Point is a longish distance from the district of cheap restaurants, and he had to walk at his shuffling gait for more than half an hour before he found a place in which to satisfy the pangs of hunger. He came at length upon a gas-lit establishment on whose windows were blazoned the words, ' All meals sixpence,' and entering, he sat down to a repast of cold beef and hot potatoes, grumbling inwardly at the contrast this poor refection offered to the banquet of which he had intended to partake. He had meant to dine at the best hotel, and had promised himself a bottle of champagne. Now his beverage was colonial beer, and his gorge rose at

it. He had hitherto been too angry to think, but as he sat grumbling over his meal, and pushing morsels about his plate distastefully at the point of a steel fork, an idea suddenly occurred to him which shed a ray of light and warmth upon his mind.

The secret which lay in his possession was of value to more people than the Bartons. Barton's son—the little Michael Hawthorne whom he and his wife had taken to England, whom he had nurtured for two years, and who was now grown to manhood and was twice a millionaire—was engaged to be married to the daughter of an English officer of high standing. Possibly that English officer might find it worth his while to pay a little. Dogdyke communed with himself about this matter for a considerable length of time, and was sometimes warm and sometimes cold about it. A vision of Tom Barton, riding-whip in hand, chilled him ; and another vision of a liberal payment for silence from General Mallard warmed him. One minute he was all comfort, and another

all discomfort. The thing looked hopeful, almost sure, then appeared uncertain, then impossible. He wavered to and fro in his mind until he had paid his reckoning, had broken his one-pound note to do it, and found himself in a public drinking bar. There he had a glass or two of brandy, and in a while his courage warmed. The threatening phantoms began to look contemptible; the bribe to silence grew surer and more sure.

He took a sudden resolution, and entering the inner bar, asked for a sheet of paper, an envelope, and pen and ink. His wants being supplied, and a third or fourth jorum of brandy and water set beside him, he began to write. He was justly proud of his epistolary accomplishments, and might, indeed, from his style, have been the author of that 'Universal Letter Writer,' which is the admiration and despair of the literary world.

'HONOURED SIR,' he began — 'Although I have not the honour to be personally known to you, I still venture to address you with

every confidence that the statement I have to offer will receive the attention it merits at your hands. I have information in my possession, which is of the utmost moment, not only to yourself, but to your charming daughter, over whose interests you doubtless watch with all the natural affection of a father. I myself am not ignorant of the workings of the holy family tie, than which I venture to believe there is nothing more sacred in our fallen human nature. If convenient to yourself, I will call at your residence at eleven o'clock to-morrow morning, and will then lay before you the statement I have to make. Should an appointment at that hour in any way incommode you, I beg to say that I will be at your service at any time it will suit you to appoint.

‘I beg, honoured Sir, to subscribe myself,

‘Your humble and obedient servant,

‘JOHN DOGDYKE

‘(Late Private Secretary to the
Governor of Tasmania).’

He read this over, admiring its turn of phrase, and the faultless, clerkly hand in which it was written ; then, having enveloped and addressed it, finished his brandy and water, and bought a stamp at the bar, he sallied out to the nearest post-office. Not caring to face the expectant landlady at home, he took a lodging for the night, and in the morning, near the appointed hour, set off for General Mallard's residence.

The General had taken a small furnished house not far from Barton's, and overlooking the same curve of the beautiful harbour.

To Mr. Dogdyke's chagrin he learned that the General was absent, and that Miss Mallard was staying for the time being at Government House. He explained that he had business of particular importance with the General, and, after some fencing with the servant who had responded to his summons at the bell, he learned that the master of the house was expected back in two days' time. Consoling

himself as best he might with the reflection that he could find food and shelter for at least two days without privation, Mr. Dogdyke withdrew. He impressed his name and the importance of his business on the domestic with some prolixity, and finally had the door shut in his face by the pampered English menial. He hung about Sydney miserably for the ensuing eight-and-forty hours, seeing in every petticoat his landlady, and spending his time mainly in the leisured consumption of brandy and water and the perusal of the newspapers.

His supplies were almost exhausted when the hour came, and he was conscious of a certain deterioration in his personal aspect. His linen had grown limp and yellowish in tone, and he was afraid that his breath and a certain puffiness about the eyes, of which his mirror assured him, would betray the manner in which he had spent the last two days. He hardened his heart, however, and presented himself at the General's house door at the time

he had himself appointed. Half to his own surprise, he was at once admitted. The General, in dressing-gown and slippers, was smoking a cigar, standing with his back to the empty fireplace, with the tails of his gown tucked through his arms. He carried an eye-glass, wore a huge iron-grey moustache, and altogether looked peculiarly formidable to Dogdyke's fancy.

'You are the person who wrote to me a day or two ago?' the General asked.

'I had that honour, sir,' returned Dogdyke, hiding his hands in his egregious cuffs, and bowing.

The General turned to the mantelpiece behind him, and took up Dogdyke's letter.

'You tell me,' he said, 'that you have intelligence of importance to communicate to me!'

'I have, sir,' returned Dogdyke. 'Intelligence of the utmost importance.'

General Mallard surveyed his visitor from head to foot, but gave no sign of any impres-

sion produced upon his own mind by that inspection.

‘What is it?’ he asked curtly.

‘I must ask, in the first place, sir,’ Dogdyke answered, ‘that what I have to say shall be treated as being given in absolute confidence. I may tell you, sir, that I am—er—temporarily—in indigent circumstances, and that I offer this information purely from a sense of duty.’

‘Oh!’ said the General. ‘You expect to be paid! Go on.’

‘I run a considerable risk, sir, in offering you the information I am about to lay before you, and I trust respectfully that you will not be——’ Dogdyke writhed his hands beneath his coat cuffs and bowed with a deprecatory backward look by way of rounding his sentence.

‘Go on,’ the General repeated.

‘Pardon me, sir,’ said Dogdyke, ‘if in the way of a necessary preface I venture to mention the name of your respected daughter.’

Miss Mallard, whom I name, sir, I am sure, with every sentiment of respect, is, I learn from the newspapers, engaged to be married.'

The General took his cigar from his lips with an action of impatience tinged with anger, stared stonily at Dogdyke through his eye-glass for an instant, returned his cigar to his lips, and uttered a single word of question.

'Well?'

'The information I have to offer, sir,' said Mr. Dogdyke, more and more disconcerted and timorous, 'relates to what I may presume to call the social status of her intended husband.'

'Well?' said the General once more.

'I am sure, sir,' continued Mr. Dogdyke, 'that I feel the delicacy of the position keenly.'

'Look here, Mr. What's-your-name—Dogdyke!'—the General consulted the letter again; 'I don't know that I have any right to listen to you at all; but in any case I don't want any rodomontade about the matter.'

Say what you have to say, and have done with it.'

'You'll agree with me, sir,' returned Dogdyke; 'I am sure, sir, that you will agree with me, when you have heard the facts I have to lay before you, that it is necessary that I should be protected by your silence.'

'I don't promise you that,' said General Mallard, shortly.

'But, sir,' cried Dogdyke, 'if what I have to say is really of genuine importance, will you not consider it as being laid before you in confidence?'

'I gather,' said General Mallard, 'that you have something to say against Mr. Michael Hawthorne. If you choose to commit what you have to say to writing, you may hand it to me in a sealed envelope, and I will undertake to submit it to Mr. Hawthorne, who will deny it or admit it, as the case may be.'

'But, sir,' cried Dogdyke, 'Mr. Hawthorne is not aware of the facts. It is a question of—of parentage.'

‘What have you to do with Mr. Hawthorne’s parentage?’ the General asked him.

‘Nothing, sir,’ Dogdyke responded. ‘But the secret of Mr. Hawthorne’s birth, sir, has been carefully shrouded, and I am in possession of the facts.’

‘In that case,’ said the General, ‘your course is to lay the facts before Mr. Hawthorne. Why do you come to me?’

‘I thought, sir,’ returned Dogdyke humbly, ‘that in a matter so nearly affecting yourself——’

‘If,’ said the General, ‘you have any statement to make to me, you may make it, but I shall certainly, if it concerns Mr. Hawthorne in any way, lay it before him.’

‘That, sir,’ said Dogdyke, writhing piteously, ‘might be my ruin, and would certainly lead to the infliction of physical violence—physical violence, sir, of the most unpleasant—may I be permitted to say?—type.’

‘I make no stipulation,’ returned the General. ‘You have something to say, for

which apparently you think it worth my while to pay you.'

'Precisely so, sir,' said Dogdyke, 'precisely so.'

'Very good,' returned General Mallard. 'I don't buy scandal at any time, and I must wish you a good morning. You may make your statement if you please, but you make it on the understanding that it is not purchased, and that it will be used openly.'

'But, sir,' cried Dogdyke, who saw the last hope of using his secret to his own profit slipping from him, 'I am in circumstances of actual need, and my sense of duty prompts me to——'

'Escape from those circumstances,' the General interjected. 'I can see that.'

'I throw myself upon your mercy, sir,' said Dogdyke. 'You shall make what use of my information you think fit. I leave to you any question of reward. I am an old man, sir; I am defenceless, and I shall make powerful enemies. I am without employment

and without resources. The fact is, sir, that the gentleman known as Mr. Michael Hawthorne is not passing by his real name. He is at this moment residing in the same house with his father and mother.'

The General snapped Dogdyke's speech in two with a fiery interrogation :—

‘What's that?’

‘His father and his mother, General Mallard,’ Dogdyke re-affirmed. ‘His real name is Barton, and his father was transported nearly thirty years ago for having taken part in a desperate poaching affray in Staffordshire.’

General Mallard dropped into the arm-chair near at hand, and stared at him with a face absolutely devoid of expression.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE General had been hit hard in action more than once in the course of a fighting life, but he had never in his whole experience been more completely knocked out of time than he was by Dogdyke's declaration. He sat and stared at the informer with a look of complete vacuity. His eye-glass retained its place, and he went on smoking, but for the moment he knew nothing, and could not in all probability have told his own name if he had been appealed to.

Dogdyke, not knowing why his statement should have produced an effect so extraordinary, was naturally a little amazed on his own side. Before either of them spoke a word, the General's manservant rapped at the door and entered, bearing a card on a

salver. The General took up the bit of paste-board and looked at it absently.

‘Shall I show the gentleman in, sir?’ asked the man.

‘Yes,’ said the General mechanically; ‘show him in.’

He had not the faintest idea as to who the gentleman might be, and was unconscious an instant later of the fact that the question had been asked, or that he had answered it.

‘This way, sir,’ said the servant’s voice outside, and Tom Barton entered. The man closed the door behind him, and the newcomer, gazing from Dogdyke to the General and back again, stood like one transfixed. Dogdyke shiveringly drew himself behind an arm-chair, and with his finger-tips on the top of it, cowered there as if ready to dodge an assailant.

‘You’re here, are you?’ said Barton, in that deep, vibrating voice of his. ‘General Mallard,’ he added, still holding Dogdyke

with his eye, 'there's just a chance that I may be a day behind the fair.'

The General rose, gathering his scattered wits together. 'Mr. Barton,' he said, 'you arrive appropriately. This person'—indicating Dogdyke by a motion of the hand—'has just made to me a very remarkable statement, in which I take you to be implicated.'

'He has, has he?' Tom responded. 'It wasn't hard to guess as much. I thought he had when I found him here. Me and my wife have been talking about things this morning, General Mallard, and I hear from her that this fellow's been trying to blackmail her. She's not the sort to be blackmailed, and she sent him to the right-about. I suppose he's brought the story here. I'm sorry for it, if that is so, because I came to let you know the truth myself. That's why I'm here, sir.' His sturdy figure was unusually upright, and his head was thrown back a little more than common. His aspect was not quite defiant,

but yet there was a sort of challenge expressed in it.

‘I think, Mr. Dogdyke,’ said the General, once again consulting the letter to make sure of his correspondent’s signature—‘I think, Mr. Dogdyke, that on the whole you had better go.’

Dogdyke emerged stealthily from behind the arm-chair, slipped crouchingly past Barton, with a watchful eye upon him all the while, stole to the door, opened it with extremest caution, and shot out in a prodigious hurry. At another moment either Barton or the General would have laughed at the exit, but just now they were both too occupied with serious thoughts to see the comic side of anything.

‘Would you oblige me, sir,’ said Tom, ‘by saying what that chap has told you?’

‘The communication,’ said General Mallard, haughtily, ‘is of so extraordinary a character——’

‘Well,’ said Tom, ‘it makes no difference

whether he's told my story or no ; I'm here to tell it. I didn't know you after all these years, General Mallard, and I suppose you didn't know me. Time's changed both of us. We've met before.'

'We have, sir,' General Mallard answered, and walking half across the room he threw his cigar into the fire-grate. The limp with which he had been afflicted ever since the unlucky night of the poaching affray which had caused Tom Barton's transportation was still evident. Tom noticed it keenly.

'General Mallard,' he said, 'you may think you have reason to bear some spite against me. I can tell you that you have none. I haven't got much hope of your believin' me, but this is the truth. I went into that field because I thought that some of my own pals were likely to get into mischief, and I tried to stop 'em. I tried to persuade 'em to go about their business. It was an unlucky night for you, but it was an unluckier night for me, and I was no more answerable for the misfortune

than you were yourself. You've got my word for that.'

'Well, sir!' said the General, still as frosty as before.

'That's not what I'm here to talk about,' Barton went on. 'I've a son, General Mallard, who is engaged to be married to your daughter. I can see you have heard the story.'

'Yes,' said the General, tugging at his moustache, 'I have heard the story.'

'Then I needn't bother you with the how and why of it just now. My lad found out by accident that his father and mother were alive, and he found out what my history was. If he had been ashamed of me, and resolved to hide the truth, I should have been sorry in a way, and I'm all the prouder of him for taking it like a man. The very first thing he wanted to do after he found it out was to come right off to you and tell you. We came together, and we were told that you were away from home. Now, my old friend Denton has been at the lad, and he's made him frightened of

bringing shame on his mother. But the missis and me have talked it over, and she's for having justice done. She don't mind for herself; she only minded for the lad. The lad don't mind it for himself; he only cares about it for his mother's sake. Now, sir, the murder's out, and I want to ask you what you're going to do about the matter.'

Now, had Tom Barton's manly declaration been made before that little rascal of a Dogdyke had had the chance to make it seem half compulsory, it would no doubt have had an immediate effect upon General Mallard's mind. He was not a clever man outside his profession, but he had a keen sense of personal honour, and in his own somewhat dull fashion, was a gentleman to the backbone. But, unfortunately, Barton's story had been discounted, and the straightforward honour of it was less strikingly apparent than it would have been without Dogdyke's intervention. General Mallard, himself, was conscious of this fact, and in obedience to a half-blind

desire to do justice to Hawthorne and to the man before him, he put a question.

‘You and Mr. Hawthorne,’ he asked, ‘came here two days ago to see me and to lay these facts before me?’

‘That’s so,’ said Barton. ‘It matters nothing to me, General Mallard, what you think about my own statement. I never meant violence to you in all my life, and I never did you harm. I don’t deny there was a time thirty years ago when, if I’d met your father—if he’d been as young a man as I was—I’d ha’ gi’en him a hiding. I felt like that, and I said it many and many a time. As for you, I never had no quarrel with you; I never wished you hurt or harm. I’ve said already that whether you believe that or no it makes no difference to me. It may make a difference to my lad.’

‘I rather fail to see that, sir,’ said General Mallard.

‘Oh!’ said Barton, slowly and heavily; ‘you fail to see that?’

‘I fail to see it,’ the General answered. ‘If you’re an innocent man, Mr. Barton, you are very much to be pitied. But I do not see how the fact can make any difference to Mr. Hawthorne’s prospects. You may tell Mr. Hawthorne from me, or I will assure him with my own lips, that he has my sympathy and my respect, but that a continuance of the relations which have until now existed between us is impossible.’

‘Wait a bit,’ said Barton; ‘let’s have a look at things. You and me’s getting into the sere and yellow leaf. We’ve forgot a good deal, I daresay, as we might be none the worse for remembering. My lad and your daughter, General Mallard, haven’t come to our time of life yet. When they have, it may look easy to them to make light o’ young folks’ affections. I’ve got to think of my boy, and you’ve got to think about your daughter.’

‘Thank you,’ said the General, even more icily than he had yet spoken. ‘I will

consider my daughter's interests for myself.'

'Wait a bit,' said Barton, standing square and resolute, with his hands folded behind him. 'Let's look at things. My lad's found out who he is. He's bent on havin' the whole truth known; I make it known at his good will and bidding. Now, who's the worse for it? The lad's a gentleman; he's a good match, though I say it, for any lady in the land. I suppose the girl cares for him, or she'd never have said "Yes" when he asked her. I know his heart's bound up in her.'

'My dear sir,' the General interrupted him, 'the statement of this morning alters the whole complexion of affairs.'

'You bear malice?' Tom asked him, simply.

'I bear no malice, sir,' the General answered, 'but I remember.' He took an angry step or two across the room, and the old wound twinged him; he laid his hand upon his hip with a gesture of pain, and

turned almost fiercely as he did so. 'I have reason to remember,' he added, and so resumed his limping walk.

'Nothing of my doing,' said Barton.

'I have your word for that, sir,' the General answered.

'Yes,' said Tom, too simply honest to suspect the satire. 'You've got my word for that. The mischief's none of my doing. I served seven years for that night's work, and I ask you to think which of the two of us was hurt most. I was new married, as you may remember; I was in a prosperous situation; I was as likely to be happy as any young fellow in England. I did a stroke o' duty that I needn't ha' done, and the result was seven years' penal servitude. Providence has seen fit to pay me back for that in part, but nothing will ever wipe away that time.'

The talk about Providence, it must be confessed, sounded very like cant to General Mallard's mind.

‘I think, sir,’ he said, ‘that we had better bring this interview to a close.’

‘I think otherwise,’ Barton answered. ‘I’m not goin’ to see my lad’s chances wrecked if I can help it. We haven’t got hold of this thing by the right end yet. My lad’s got nigh on two millions of money, General Mallard. He’s been bred a gentleman. He’s gone about amongst the best people in the old country. I needn’t brag about him,’ he went on, with unconscious and unintentional flattery. ‘You thought him good enough only yesterday to wed your daughter, and that says as much for him as I care to say. There’s no change passed over him—he’s just as rich and just as good-looking and just as high-minded and as much a gentleman as ever he was.’

‘I have no desire,’ said the General, who by this time was limping up and down the room at a great rate—‘I’ve no desire to be personally offensive, but I must beg that this interview shall close, and that the subject we

have discussed shall be broached no more between us.'

'Aye, aye, aye,' said Barton, 'but there's more than you and me in this.'

'I beg to assure you,' said the General, arresting himself in his walk, and turning upon his heel to face his interlocutor—'I beg to assure you, Mr. Barton, that so far as my daughter is concerned, my word is likely to be final.'

'I shan't last for ever,' Barton answered, apparently unaffected by this declaration, 'nor yet will the missis; in the course of nature we've got to go. When we go, Michael takes everything. Now, I know something about business, and I tell you the lad's going to be amongst the first dozen of rich men in the world—there, or thereabouts.'

'My good sir,' said the General, 'I have already told you that I do not desire to be personally offensive. I need not tell my reason for declaring that the match between my daughter and your son is broken off. If

you desire me to be brutally candid with you, I have it in my power to gratify your wish. You waste words, sir, and I desire to control my temper.'

'You needn't be afraid of hurtin' me,' Tom answered. 'Have it all out. If I'm to tell the lad anything at all, let me take a straight story to him.'

'You shall have it, then,' returned the General, facing upon him once more. His nervous hands tugged at his great grey moustache, and his lips trembled with suppressed anger. 'I decline absolutely and unequivocally to permit an arrangement to continue which was begun, however innocently, under false pretences. I will not unite my daughter to the son of a man whose name bears such a stigma as your own. My daughter herself will not wish to be united to the son of the man whose wicked follies, to say the least of it, maimed her father, and left him half unfitted for the pursuit of the profession on which he had set all his am-

bitious and his hopes. There is your answer, sir, and I trust that it is sufficiently explicit.'

A ring at the bell of the hall-door went unheard by either of them in the passion of the moment.

'That's your last word, sir?' Barton asked.

'That, sir,' returned the General, 'is my final word, absolutely and irrefragably—my final word on the whole matter.'

Barton moved towards the door, and at the very instant in which he laid his hand upon the handle a rap sounded from without. Tom opened the door and walked into the hall, passing the serving-man who had carried in his card to General Mallard. He had already taken up his hat when the man spoke.

'Miss Mallard sent me to say, sir, that she has just returned.'

'Tell her,' the General answered, 'tell her I will join her immediately.'

'Yes, sir,' the servant answered, and was

in the act of closing the door when Barton, wheeling round, laid a heavy hand against it, and re-entered the room. The General lifted eyebrows so amazed that his glass dropped from its place. His white fingers sought for it hurriedly and short-sightedly, until he found it and returned it to his eye.

‘General Mallard,’ said Tom, seriously, ‘your daughter’s in the house. May I take her answer as well as yours?’

‘There is no need for that,’ the General answered.

‘I beg your pardon, sir,’ said Barton, ‘there’s more than one side to this affair. If I can tell my lad that your daughter’s of your mind, it puts an end to everything. It’s just as well for your sake as for mine that you should see your way to put an end to the thing one way or another right off. I’ll wait as long as you like, but I want a definite answer.’

‘You have your definite answer,’ cried the General, somewhat stormily.

‘I’ve got half a definite answer,’ returned Barton. ‘I want a whole one. You are sure of the girl’s mind. It can’t cost much to let me have it from herself, and I can promise you this—if once my lad knows that the girl’s “No” goes along with her father’s, he’s got a bit too much of the old Barton spirit in him, though he never did bear the name, to trouble you or her again.’

The General rang the bell without a word, and, the servant re-appearing—‘Tell Miss Mallard,’ he said, ‘that I desire to see her in the drawing-room as soon as possible. You may wait here,’ he added to Barton, ‘if you please. I think I can promise that you will not be long detained. Possibly, after all, the course you suggest is the wisest and completest.’

‘All right,’ said Tom. ‘Don’t hurry on my account.’

The General bowed stiffly and limped from the apartment.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE General's morning-room looked out upon the trim and well-kept lawn, and had an aspect altogether fresh and cool and shady. Barton, left alone to await the verdict, of which to tell the truth he had but little doubt in his own mind, strolled to the French window and drummed on the panes awhile. He stood in that attitude for a minute or two, and then looked at his watch, and fell to pacing up and down, taking extraordinary care to tread at each return to and fro on the same figure of the carpet. He had not hoped much from his embassy, and could scarcely be said to be disappointed at its conclusion; but, all the same, he felt his own impotence in the matter keenly. He had had no opportunity all his life long for the display of

fatherly affection, and he charged himself unjustly with having felt but little. It was true that the occupations of a busy and successful life had often withdrawn him from thoughts of the boy who, in ignorance of his very existence, was growing up to manhood on the other side of the world. It was true that Michael had never been more than a sentimental reality to him, and yet it was true that in whatsoever fate had blessed him he found value chiefly because it would one day be of service to the son whom he dared not acknowledge. The child, in fact, had been the mainspring of the father's life, and Barton did himself a huge injustice.

Five minutes went by, ten minutes, a quarter of an hour, and still the General did not return. There were half-a-dozen books lying scattered on the centre table, and the visitor, pausing in his march, took up each one of these and turned over its pages absently. The works were in French or German, and dealt exclusively with military matters. They

might as well have been Greek to Barton, but he looked over them with an unmeaning curiosity. When he had inspected the last, he drew out his watch again — twenty minutes had gone by, and still there was no sign of the General. The time for Tom's morning cigar had passed by an hour, and the tobacco hunger came upon him strongly. He opened the French windows leading to the lawn, lit a cigar, and paced to and fro on the shadowed turf outside.

‘What on earth,’ he began to ask himself, in his growing impatience, ‘could the General be doing?’ He half wondered if an intentional slight were being put upon him, but dismissed that fancy as being unworthy of him. He smoked his cigar to the end, threw the stump away, and returned to the room. A clock of black marble ticked irritatingly on the mantelpiece, and in his uneasy impatience he longed to stop it. Distant sounds of life came through the open window—the whistle of a steamboat in the bay, music

from some far-off water-party, very soft and faint, the roll of cab-wheels in the street, the distant murmur of the city itself, like the faint note of a slumberous sea. Once more he stared wearily at the pages of the unmeaning volumes, and when he again consulted his watch he found that he had been waiting nearly an hour and a quarter.

Obviously the General had met with a touch of opposition, and at that thought Barton's heart began to beat more quickly. He was well-nigh as interested in the affair as if he himself had been the suitor for the lady's hand, and the thought that she might be found to be loyal carried with it an inspiration of hope, almost of triumph. He remembered his own youth and his own youthful passion well enough to know how he would have felt in such a case.

'If there had been anything betwixt Mary and me,' he told himself, 'and she'd have given me her downright word, I'd have waited forty years.' This sort of declara-

tion is much commoner to youth than to advanced middle age, but it was true for all that, and typical of the downright honesty of the man.

Meanwhile the General was having rather a tough time of it, and was meeting with an unexpected opposition. He had told the story, and had found it received with due amazement. Clara had indeed for a while been so astonished as to be unable to return an answer, and it was only after a lapse of two or three minutes that she was able to ask if her father were really sure that the strange tale was true.

‘Barton himself is in the house at this moment,’ the General answered. ‘The story comes to me from both the sources I have mentioned. I have told the man that the whole thing is necessarily over, and he wishes to have your word for it before he goes. I have promised him he shall have it.’

‘I have given my word already,’ said the girl.

Dogdyke had already given the General what bade fair to be the greatest amazement of his life that morning, but even Dogdyke had not so profoundly astonished him as this speech did, coming from his daughter's lips.

‘My—my child!’ he said, stammeringly.

‘My promise has been given already,’ she repeated. Her cheek was flushed, and her eyes brightened as she spoke.

‘But, my dear, my dear Clara!’ cried the General, in wounded amazement. ‘The promise was not given under existing conditions; it is impossible that, under existing conditions, it should be fulfilled. I warn you, my dear, that I shall forbid it; that I set the whole weight of my authority—whatever that may be—against it.’

She rose at these words with a look of proud defiance, but checked herself before speaking the words which rose to her lips.

‘I admit,’ she said, laying one hand with open fingers on the table, and fitting the

finger-tips of the other hand between them—
‘I admit that the circumstances look perplexing from your point of view, papa,’ she added.

‘And from your own,’ cried the General.

‘From mine,’ she answered, ‘they look quite simple. Mr. Hawthorne has not changed, nor have I. When he sends to me to ask me to release him, I shall have my answer.’

‘But, my dear Clara,’ the General exclaimed, fidgeting in his chair, ‘there is no such person as Mr. Hawthorne. The man you knew under that name had no real right to bear it.’

‘It seems,’ she answered, ‘to have been the name given to him by his parents; it was the only name he knew himself entitled to.’

‘This is not a matter to be quibbled about,’ cried her father.

‘I am not disposed to quibble,’ she re-

turned. 'You and I must not quarrel, papa, if we can help it.'

'Quarrel!' cried the General. 'Heaven forefend! But, my dear child, you must not oppose my will in this.'

'Papa,' she said, 'let's be reasonable.' She passed round the table and laid one hand lightly on his shoulder. 'Why do you suppose that I accepted Mr. Hawthorne's proposal?'

'I presume,' he answered rather pettishly, 'that you accepted his proposal for the usual reasons.'

'And what are the usual reasons, papa?'

'The usual reasons,' he answered, with an increasing fretfulness, 'are—are the usual reasons. I have nothing to say against the young man himself. He is sufficiently good-looking, he has a prepossessing manner, he has had the breeding of a gentleman, he looked in every way eligible. He offered a magnificent settlement; the match when it

was made had my approval as completely as it has my disapproval now.'

'You find no other reason, papa?'

'I needn't go further afield for reasons,' he retorted. 'Those I have given you are ample, surely?'

'They would not have been ample for me,' she answered.

'Now, my dear child,' said the General, rising and turning to confront her. 'If we are going to have any sentimental nonsense imported into this question, I shall have to exert an authority which I have hitherto held in abeyance.'

'I beg you not to take that tone, papa,' the girl answered. 'The only result it can have must be to make us both unhappy.'

'You tell me——' cried the General fretfully.

'Papa, dear,' she said, laying a hand on either of his shoulders and looking him frankly in the face, 'I should never have accepted Mr. Hawthorne unless there had been

something more than the reasons you think sufficient.'

'Do you mean to tell me,' her father demanded, 'that you are going to marry the son of a convict with your eyes open?'

'I am sorry to distress you, dear,' she answered.

'But you do distress me,' the General stormed. 'The thing is intolerable, impossible, unheard of. I won't submit to it. I won't hear another word about it.'

'Nothing I have heard,' she answered, 'makes any difference to my opinion of Mr. Hawthorne.'

'What I have heard,' her father answered, 'makes a mighty difference to Mr. Hawthorne Barton. I shall go back to this fellow and repeat to him what I have said already. The match is definitely and finally broken off.'

'You will not tell him that from me, papa,' said his daughter.

The General, who had gone away from

her hands, and had walked impatiently to a little distance, turned with actual fierceness, with one clenched fist trembling in the air above his head. He dropped his hands without speaking, and paced up and down the room to cool himself.

‘My dear,’ he began in a while, when he had leashed his anger and felt that he could control himself for speech, ‘you and I have never had a quarrel in our lives. Ever since your poor dear mother died, in your very infancy, I have done my best to fill her place for you. I—I have not failed in my duty as a father. I will not say that I have gratified your every whim, for, had I done so, I should have thought myself lacking in duty; but it has been the effort of my life to make you truly happy, and I tell you that I deserve some consideration at your hands.’

‘Papa,’ she cried, in a wounded voice, ‘have I ever failed to give it?’

‘You fail me now,’ her father answered, tempestuously. ‘You fail me now.’

‘I am very sorry, dear,’ she said, with a touch of desperate resignation in her tone.

General Mallard made an impatient movement to and fro. He waved his right hand with the preliminary flourish of an orator, checked himself, waved his hand anew, made an ineffectual motion with his lips, stopped short again, and, turning away from her, walked the whole length of the room. He was a man of an occasional vivid temper; but she had never in her life known him to be so moved.

‘Papa,’ she said appealingly, ‘what can I do?’

‘My darling Clara,’ he returned, ‘when I think that my daughter positively sees no bar to her marriage in the fact that the man to whom she has ignorantly plighted herself is the son of a convict—I say that when I think of that, I—I—I am unable in your presence to express my feelings.’

‘If Mr. Hawthorne had knowingly deceived me,’ said Clara. ‘and I had discovered

the fact, I should have lost my respect for him. As it is——'

'As it is!' cried the General, storming. 'As it is—well, what of it as it is?'

'Papa,' she reminded him, with a touch of his own temper, 'you have not been accustomed to address me in this way.'

'My dear child,' returned the General, 'this is not a matter to be handled with kid gloves. I do not permit you to criticise the manner in which I address myself to the consideration of this question. I tell you once for all that the condition of affairs which existed this morning exists no longer. I abolish it. I proclaim it unendurable, intolerable; it is done with!'

He stormed with a white face thrust within a foot of his daughter's, and she, her face as white as his, met the passionate voice and look with an unmoved gaze.

'And I on my side declare,' she answered, with great slowness and distinctness, 'that nothing is changed.'

‘You tell me,’ he began—but she drew back a little, and stopped him with an imperative wave of the hand.

‘I tell you, since you force me,’ she replied, ‘that I would never have consented to marry Mr. Hawthorne if I had not loved him; and that if we part it shall never be through any act of mine.’

He stood for a moment in an inarticulate rage. The whole thing had been so absolutely clear to him, and was still so transparent as he saw it, that this blank opposition was positively maddening. He had never for an instant looked forward to it; even now that he encountered it he could hardly believe in its reality. He had been a most excellent father, not over tender of demonstration, but full of solid affection and goodwill, dutiful to the last point in watchful guardianship, and the merest trifle of a martinet. The girl had shown him once or twice that she had a will of her own; but matters had been trifling and he had yielded with a good grace, even

though somewhat opposed to her opinions. A thousand times she had guided him by such arts as affectionate women use without exciting the remotest suspicion in his mind that he was being persuaded to do anything outside his own initiative ; but here was the first definite breach between their lives, and it looked incredible.

‘It would be but a poor thing for us to quarrel, papa,’ she said, with a sudden touch of tenderness. ‘Don’t let us do that.’ She made a movement towards him, but he put her away with a wrathful wave of the hand against her.

‘There can be no more between us,’ he declared, ‘until I am obeyed.’

Clara Mallard looked at her father sorrowfully, but made no further attempt to appease him. He on his side began once more to pace the room to and fro with smothered exclamations of: ‘Absurd ! Ridiculous ! Convict brand ! Honoured name !’ and what not. Clara moved quietly to an *escritoire* which

stood near one of the windows of the room, and, seating herself before it, took a sheet of paper and a pen, and wrote. He paused in his walk to watch her, angrily, and once made a motion as if he would have interrupted her. Her pen glided swiftly over the paper, and then stopped. She read what she had written, and held the sheet towards him over her shoulder.

‘Will you kindly read that, papa?’ she asked.

The brief note was not dated or addressed, but it ran thus:—

‘Mr. Thomas Barton has this morning related a very strange story to my father. Are you aware of its import, and if so, do you confirm it?—CLARA MALLARD.’

‘I may send that, I suppose?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ he answered, nodding; ‘you may send it, certainly.’ It seemed to him like a sign of yielding in her.

‘Will you ring the bell, papa?’ she asked.

He obeyed her request, and she meanwhile addressed an envelope, and enclosed her note within it.

‘Take that note immediately,’ she said to the servant who had responded to her father’s summons, ‘and await an answer.’

The man retired, and there was full a quarter of an hour of silence. At the end of that time the messenger came back again, and handed a note to Clara. She broke the seal and read:—

‘Dear Miss Mallard,—I desired to accompany my father this morning, but it was his wish to spare me. I know that the story he had to tell is true, and I have nothing to do for my own part but to free you from your engagement, which I no longer have a right to ask you to maintain. With profound and unchanged esteem,—Yours,

‘MICHAEL HAWTHORNE.’

She read this letter twice or thrice, her father regarding her watchfully meanwhile.

She handed it to him at length, and his eyes flashed with triumph as he read it.

‘You see,’ he cried, bringing one hand briskly down upon the letter—‘you see that the young man understands the position of affairs.’

‘Precisely,’ she answered, and resumed her seat at the writing-table.

‘What are you going to do?’ her father cried.

‘I will show you in a moment,’ she answered, with a composure which had to his ears nothing ominous in it.

She wrote slowly this time, and paused often, but at last the rapid motion of the pen told her father that she had reached the signature. She pressed the sheet of blotting-paper firmly over the page, and held the paper out at arm’s length towards the General.

‘Dear Mr. Hawthorne’—the second note began—‘I had exactly anticipated your reply, and I have to thank you for it warmly. I

decline the freedom you are so chivalrous as to offer, unless you ask it for your own sake.'

The General read no further, and tore the paper across and across until he could hold the fragments no longer, and then, with a sweep of the hand, scattered them in a little mimic snowstorm to the air.

CHAPTER XXX

It took Mr. Whateley a full half-hour to recover his old aspect of *savoir faire* when Denton quitted his box at the theatre. He levelled his opera-glass at the stage, and watched the performance with a great pretence of interest, though, as a matter of fact, he saw nothing of what was going on before him, and was powerless to detach his mind from the memory of the terrible old gentleman who had so unexpectedly pounced down upon him.

When he began to recover himself a little, he turned his lorgnette upon the Count, who still sat in the opposite box, paying very little heed to the business of the stage, but devoting himself with marked attention to the lady at his side. The stout widow herself was so

pleased to be seen in the society of a foreign gentleman of title that she even took some pains to draw public attention to herself, and the conversation carried on was at times so vivacious as to draw indignant comment from the pit and gallery.

When the performance came to an end, the Count rushed round the house for his dust-coat and crush hat, and escorted the lady to her carriage with much *empressement*.

‘You might introduce me, Von H.,’ said Mr. Whateley, in his airiest manner.

The Count looked at him for the space of a single second as if he would willingly have poisoned him; but, recovering himself almost instantly, presented his dear friend with many flourishes, and announced him as having but newly arrived from London. The stout widow expressed a hope that she might meet Mr. Whateley again.

‘Any friend of the Count von Herder’s, I’m sure!’

The Count and Mr. Whateley raised their hats as the carriage rolled away, and Von Herder, linking his arm in his companion's, led him to the other side of the street, which was comparatively deserted.

‘Don’t you try to spoil my came all round, my yonk frient.’

‘I shan’t hurt you in that direction, Von H.,’ returned Mr. Whateley. ‘You’ll invite me to the wedding, won’t you?’

‘I am not so sure of that,’ the Count responded.

He had been exceedingly sweet and affable for the past two hours, full of smiles and compliments and conversational charm; but on his return to Mr. Whateley’s society he grew instantly sombre, and even saturnine.

They walked to the hotel in a silence almost unbroken, and in the presence of a little knot of loungers at the door the Count was once more effusively friendly to his companion.

‘We will haf a bottle of champagne sent up to my room,’ he said, clapping Whateley on the shoulder. ‘Eh? Not? We will smoke a cigar and haf a chat apout old times together, eh?’

He carried on this pretence of gaiety along the corridor, and half-way up the stairs, but stood glowering wrathfully by whilst Whateley drew the key from his pocket and then opened the door of the bedroom, which the Count was forced to recognise for the time being as his prison.

‘I’ll keep the key, Von H., old fellow,’ said Whateley, returning it to his pocket as he spoke; ‘and when you’re snug in bed I’ll tuck you in with it. You like to be looked after, don’t you, Von H.? I’ll tell you what it is, old man: I’ll pay for that bottle of wine you were good enough to speak about. I’m going to be set on my financial legs to-morrow, ain’t I? I can afford to pay for a glass of wine, and it’ll cheer you up a bit. You look a bit down in the mouth, Von H.

You ain't half as rejoiced at my good fortune as I thought you would be.'

The Count threw his hat upon the bed, strode rapidly to the door, and closed it with a bang. The room, which was only illuminated from the corridor, and faintly by the street lamps outside, went suddenly dark.

'Take care, Von H.,' said the younger man in a threatening voice, which had a quaver of fear in it. 'I've got my hand on the bell, and I'll ring the house down.'

Von Herder said nothing for the moment, but, fumbling in his pockets, found a silver match-box, struck a light, and turned on and lit the gas. His face was pale with rage, and he held both his shaking hands close to Whateley's nose.

'Inzult me again, you apominaple little insect, driumph ofer me again, speak again a vord, and I will make an ent of you!'

His voice was lowered, for even in the excess of his rage he remembered that there might be people in either of the adjoining

rooms. But the very whisper in which he spoke gave his words an added intensity.

‘All right, Von H.,’ returned Mr. Whateley, with propitiatory voice and manner; ‘it ain’t like you to flare up at a bit of chaff.’

‘Jaff!’ the Count echoed in the same intense and savage whisper. ‘I vill not enture your jaff.’

‘No, no!’ said Whateley, shrinking from him as he made a movement forward. ‘You shan’t, Von H., I won’t ask you to; upon my word of honour, I won’t ask you to! Look here, Von, let’s be friends. Let’s take it easy.’

The Count’s teeth were set closely together. His lips were curled as if he were hungry for a bite at Mr. Whateley, and his eyes were mere slits behind his gold-rimmed glasses.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘you know your blace, *canaille*! Speak to me again, one disrespectful vord; gird at me? Vill you dare? Eh?’

‘No, no!’ said Mr. Whateley, in vehement protest; ‘I wouldn’t dream of it. Sit down, old chap, and let me ring for a glass of wine.’

The Count, with a final scowl at him, turned and drew a chair to the table. Mr. Whateley rang, and when the waiter answered his summons, called for a bottle of champagne. His order having been executed, he uncorked the wine, filled the glasses, and drew up a chair opposite to the indignant Count.

‘Look here, Von, old chap,’ he began, ‘I’ve let you think—it ain’t your fault, old fellow, you’ll see it in a minute—I’ve let you think I’ve come here for nothing else but just to collar my share in that last little speculation. Well, I haven’t. I’ve got the biggest thing you ever heard of in all your life.’

‘I tesire,’ returned the Count, ‘to hold no further intercourse with you.’

‘Oh,’ returned Mr. Whateley, ‘that’s all right. You ain’t going to nurse malice over

a bit of a joke? You ain't that sort o' party, are you, Von? Look here!'—he half rose, and leaning across the table till his face approached the Count's, he whispered at him—'What do you say to a hundred and twenty thousand?'

The Count's eyes glittered behind his glasses, and as Whateley sank back into his seat, Von Herder laid both arms ponderously on the table.

'A huntret and twenty thousand what?' he asked.

'Pounds!' whispered Whateley. 'Sterling. What d'ye say to 'em?'

The Count lifted his right hand, flourished a forefinger in the air, and tapped himself on the breast.

'I should say,' he answered, with his customary smile in full play again—'I should say, "Come here, my tarlings!"'

'I suppose so,' returned Whateley, with a grin. 'Look here, Von,' he added, rising and looking about him with a prowling and pre-

datory air, 'what about the house? What are the walls like? Is it safe to talk here?'

The Count raised his eyebrows and shook his head.

'Visper!'

Whateley carried his chair round to Von Herder's side of the table, and their two heads went together.

'I've got a hundred and twenty thousand,' Whateley answered, 'pretty near as safe as if I'd got it in my hands. It can be worked beautifully out here; and, in point of fact, that's what I came for.'

The Count stooped his ear a little nearer to the whispering lips, and nodded.

'It's as safe as a house,' said Whateley: 'Safe as a church. There is, of course, the least little chance in the world that it won't come off, but I think I've arranged for everything.'

He paused, and the Count shot a single word of inquiry at him: 'Vell?'

'There's an old military cove out here,'

Whateley whispered ; ‘ an Englishman who’s been sent out on Government business. He’s inspecting the fortifications, or something of that kind.’

‘ I know him,’ the Count whispered back again. ‘ Cheneral Mallard—is that the man?’

‘ That’s the man,’ said Whateley. ‘ A pal of mine is in the swim, and he’ll have to be reckoned with. He’s confidential clerk to the General’s agent. We put everything together, and I think we’ve got everything compact. He’s made photographs of every letter the General has ever written to his boss, and I’ve got ’em with me. I know all his investments as well as he does himself, and I’ve got a score of samples of his handwriting ; I’ve got some of the envelopes photographed too. That ought to be good enough for you, eh, Von?’

The Count nodded and smiled, rubbing his hands together. ‘ What do you propose to do?’ he asked. ‘ How do you propose to act?’

‘We shall send instructions,’ Whateley answered, ‘from the General to sell out stock—all the stock which we shall be able to specify, and to transfer it to one of the Melbourne banks. We shall instruct the agent, since it is a pretty large affair, that on receipt of General Mallard’s letter he is to wire to the General, say at the Grand Hotel at Melbourne, or Menzies’, where the General won’t be at the time. I shall collar that telegram and wire back in the words agreed on, to carry out the orders already given.’

‘That’s the first moment of tanger,’ said the Count, frowning, with intense attention.

‘Yes,’ said Whateley, ‘that’s the first moment of danger. Now, there’s just a chance—it’s a million to one against it, but for all that it might happen—there’s just a chance that a real letter might get there by the very mail that carries ours; but then, you see, there’s a friend at court, and any other communication would get burned. We’ll register our letter, to make sure of it.’

‘Yes,’ said the Count. ‘But how do you get the money when it’s once here? You personate the General?’

Mr. Whateley, with a smile of infinite enjoyment, looked up to the Count without a word, and nodded.

‘I say, Von, old chap,’ he said, ‘there’s a brace of us. I reckon you to be about the best penman in the world, and I think I might have made a bit myself if I had gone behind the footlights. Eh?’

‘Well, yes,’ the Count assented, ‘there’s a pair of us; we do very nicely together.’

He was completely mollified by this time, and drank the glass of champagne before him with a gleeful relish.

‘Now, why didn’t you tell me all this before?’ he asked.

‘You won’t fly out at me again, will you?’ retorted Whateley.

‘No, no,’ the Count returned. ‘I’m quite in a goot humour.’

‘Well, I wanted to rile you a bit, to tell

you the plain truth, Von. You shouldn't have done it, Von; you shouldn't have done it.'

'Now,' said the Count, turning upon him with outspread hands and a look of injured innocence, 'you know very well that I never meant to do anything but the square thing.'

'Oh, do I, Von, do I?' asked Mr. Whateley, in a protesting tone.

'You know it fery well inteet,' returned the Count.

'Well, Von,' said Mr. Whateley, 'I'm very glad to be told so on your authority, but I never thought I knew it till this minute. And mind you, Von, friendship's friendship; but it don't do to have too much of it in business, and I'm going to have the handling of the oof in this case.'

'What will your frient in London say to that?' the Count inquired.

'Oh, my friend in London's all right,' responded Whateley. 'Don't you fret about my friend in London. He's too useful and

too dangerous to be played the fool with. There's more little games to follow on. I tell you, my friend in London and I have had our heads together. There's a fortune in it. Three or four months' easy work and fascinating travel—that's all it wants. I've got a little game in India, a little game in the States; I've got a very nice little game in the States, Von, and I shall want a penman.'

'Very well,' said the Count, smiling and pouring out a second glass of wine, 'I think I know the person who may suit you. But I don't think I shall travel much; I have a little matrimonial speculation here: it may come to something, it may come to nothing, but I shall wait and see. There's half a million there. You're a very clever little person, Mr. Whateley, but it will be a long time before all your clever little comes pring you half a million. Eh?'

'Yes, Von, I suppose it will,' said Whateley. 'I have thought myself now and

again of trying the matrimonial dodge. I ain't got your figure, Von, and I ain't got your ways ; but, though you mightn't think it to look at me, I'm a bit of a favourite among the ladies, too. But I never could make my mind up to it, and I like my bachelor freedom. You know, Von, I'm the sort of young man that likes to have a latch-key. I ain't wild, I ain't a rackety sort at all ; but I like my freedom.'

'Let's think a little apout business,' the Count reminded him. 'You say you have photographs of the writing ; could you let me look at one ?'

'Certainly, my boy,' said Whateley. 'Just stop here a bit ; I'll fetch one.'

He walked to his own bedroom, lit the gas there, unlocked one of his trunks, and extracted from it a cash-box. Unlocking this he took from it a single photographic copy of a letter, and an original envelope in General Mallard's writing. He read the letter through to make sure that it conveyed no

special information, and then, having locked up its companions, returned to the Count.

‘There it is,’ he said, laying letter and envelope on the table. ‘I don’t know much about that sort of thing myself, but I should think you’d find it pretty easy.’

‘Nothing is easy,’ the Count responded, ‘except to people who do not know how to do it; to a perfect workman everything is hard.’

He took off his spectacles, and, drawing from his waistcoat pocket a small magnifying glass, he examined the handwriting before him with great exactness and earnestness.

‘Yes,’ he said; ‘yes. That will do. I can manage that work. You say you have many of these?’

‘I have a score of them at least,’ Whateley answered. ‘And the best of it is we shall be able to cut them up and make a mosaic of ’em, so that you won’t want really to write a solitary word you can’t copy.’

The Count snapped his fingers.

‘In that case,’ he said, ‘it is a pagatelle. The true difficulty is to construct—that asks for chenius. To copy temands no more than care and skill.’

‘I shouldn’t care to trust it to a duffer,’ said Whateley.

‘No,’ returned the Count; ‘what’s the use of drusting anything to a tuffer? I know my pusiness.’

‘We’ll go to the bank to-morrow, Von,’ his companion suggested, ‘and get that little bit of business through together, and then you can get to work as soon as ever you like.’

‘Goot,’ the Count answered, with as much of an air of *bonhomie* as he could assume. ‘You had better take care of these. Lock them up safely. We shan’t want anything to be seen of them by anypoty.’

‘All right, Von,’ returned Whateley. ‘You know your business, as you say, and I know mine. Finish the wine, and I shall toddle off to bed.’

‘No,’ said the Count, waving his hand

against it, 'no more vine for me. I want a steaty hand and a clear eye. You may take it with you. I want to think about a few things.'

'All right, Von,' returned Mr. Whateley. 'I'll toddle. Good night, and pleasant dreams.'

He took the half-empty bottle, nursing it in the crook of his arm, and with a half-quizzical, half-alarmed expression, drew the key of the door from his pocket.

'I ain't going to take that little precaution, Von,' he said.

'Fery well, my yonk frient,' returned the Count. 'Good night.'

He was left to his own reflections, which were, upon the whole, satisfactory to him.

'He's a clefer little scamp,' he told himself; 'a fery clefer little scamp inteet. He'll make a creat deal of money, but he's got into a hapit of running risks. I ton't run any risk at all. I ton't mean to run any risk at all. It's a cheap way of earning money, and forty

thousand pounds is a good deal. If my tear
yonk frient's scheme should succeet—and I
don't know why it shouldn't—I shall co pack
to respectability, perhaps I shall marry—who
knows? In any case, if this one coup
succeets I'll be safe for the rest of my life. I
will pe henceforwart a goot yonk man.'

CHAPTER XXXI

AT the first sound of rending paper Clara flashed to her feet and stood with astonished and indignant eyes, staring at the wrathful old gentleman before her. The mimic snow-storm fluttered slowly down. One or two of the flakes of paper rested on the bosom of her dress, and one or two fell upon the General's own shoulders.

‘That,’ said the girl, ‘is less an act of authority than an insult, papa.’

‘I have never commanded your obedience till now,’ the General answered, ‘but I ask for it here, and I will have it.’

She curtsied to him, and made a movement to leave the room, but he intercepted her by a rapid limping walk towards the door.

‘You do not leave me,’ he said, ‘until I have exacted a promise from you.’

She walked back to her place at the desk, and began once more to write.

‘I warn you,’ cried the General, ‘that if you repeat what you have already written, you waste your time. I will not permit it to be forwarded.’

‘I warn you, papa,’ she retorted, ‘that you are far from taking the right tone with me. We are far, perhaps, from taking the right tone with each other. We shall both regret this scene. I shall be sorry for having hurt you with so much temper. We shall have to admit that we provoked each other. Would it not be wiser to say nothing for an hour or two? You may rely upon me to do nothing without your knowledge.’

The General, being angry already, was all the more incensed by the suggestion that there was any need for him to bridle his temper.

‘In this case,’ he replied, ‘I do well to be angry.’

‘Nobody ever does well to be angry, papa,’ she replied. ‘It would be a pity if, after all these years of affection, we should quarrel.’

‘I demand to be obeyed,’ said the General.

‘You have told me that already,’ returned the girl. ‘The mere repetition of the demand gives it no added force. If I can’t obey an affectionate wish, I won’t obey an angry one. But, pray, let us be friends—let us at least be quiet.’

General Mallard was in no mood to be quiet. He had never in his life suspected that his daughter could rule him, and to discover that, on a point so weighty as that of marriage, she was in flat rebellion to him was a profound amazement. There are some men who resent astonishment as if it were an injury, and there was a touch of this feeling in the General’s mind. His daughter not only had no right to defy his will, but she had no

right to amaze him in doing it. He was more angry that he knew, and at this last appeal he travelled beyond bounds.

‘If we are going to be military,’ said the girl, ‘I decline to carry on the conversation.’

She rang the bell, and her father glared at her.

‘What is this, madam?’ he demanded. ‘Do you propose to summon my domestics to expel me?’

‘No, sir,’ she responded. ‘I propose to change my dress. I propose to change it here, and I have rung for my maid to tell her so.’

The General vanished, routed, without further words. In his rage, and now in his sudden discomfiture, he had forgotten his visitor, and burst in on him grey and breathless.

‘Halloa!’ said Barton, who had stopped short at his entrance in a dreary march about the room.

‘Halloa!’ replied the General, recalled to

himself. 'I beg your pardon, sir. I had for the moment forgotten that you were here.'

'You seem to have forgotten for a good many moments,' declared Barton, dragging out his watch, and holding it towards General Mallard. 'I have waited more than an hour and a half.'

'I beg your pardon,' said the General, 'I beg your pardon, sir. I am in some—some agitation. I will not disguise from you the fact that my daughter and I are not in accord. For the first time in our lives we stand severed. I am an affectionate father, sir ; I value the happiness of my child, and it is my duty to repeat to you the statement I have already made. The association proposed by Mr. Hawthorne is rendered impossible by the circumstances which have transpired this morning.'

'I waited for your daughter's answer General Mallard,' said Barton.

'You have it, sir,' the General answered,

with a sudden resumption of dignity. 'But I should not recommend you to attach much value to it. My daughter will obey my wishes.'

'Ah!' said Tom. 'You told me that before. Well, you see, she doesn't.'

'You and I, sir,' returned the General, with a positively Arctic hauteur, 'will not discuss that question.'

Barton saw how angry and disturbed he was, and recognised the futility of discussion.

'I will wish you a very good morning, General.'

'Good morning, sir.'

With that, and a stiff salute on either side, the interview came to a close. For the time being—but for the time being only—the General had been driven from the field. He had never in all his valorous and rather stupid life turned his back upon the foe till now, but he had never until now encountered so powerful an enemy. Even a momentary

falling back was bitter to him. He had never been so galled, for, when everything is said, there is no quarrel so terrible as a quarrel between people who sincerely love each other. Coleridge speaks no more than the plain truth: 'To be wroth with one we love doth work like madness in the brain.' To sit still and think about what had happened and was happening was impossible. He tramped furiously about the room until it seemed to grow altogether too small for him, and then he marched out on to the lawn, and there continued his excited walk at large. In about a quarter of an hour Clara came out upon the lawn dressed for walking, and fastening the last button of her glove.

'Papa,' she said, with an assumption of commonplace in tone and manner incredibly irritating to the General's nerves, 'I am going down to the Grampians to call on Mrs. Barton. I suppose I shall be back in the course of an hour or an hour and a half at the outside.'

He permitted her to achieve the end of her speech, simply and purely because the first part of it had stricken him dumb with a new rage and a new amazement.

‘You are going to the Grampians?’ he said, when he could find the words.

‘Yes, papa,’ she responded, with perfect tranquillity, and turned away.

He followed her for a step or two and paused, irresolutely. He had chivalrous ideas about women, and especially chivalrous ideas about his own daughter, but he could have found it in his heart to shake her. That, however, was an impossible achievement.

‘Clara,’ he said, tremulously, ‘I forbid that.’

‘You may understand, papa,’ she replied, wheeling slowly round, ‘you may imprison me, if you like so far to humble yourself and me. You may stay me by violence, but I shall yield to nothing else.’

What in such a case was an unhappy father to do? He had forbidden, and his

authority was set on one side. Physical constraint was out of the question, and there was nothing for it but physical constraint or submission. He allowed her to walk away, and returning to the apartment he had so lately quitted, sat down to digest his bitter pill of family insubordination as best he could.

For her part, Clara felt a justification which she could not express. She had known the world now as well as a girl may for two or three years, and in the course of that time, being not merely clever and attractive in person, but wealthy, had found many suitors. Some of them, of course, had really been in love with her ; others had with complete sincerity imagined themselves to be in love ; one or two had come fortune-hunting. She had never really cared for any of them, though she had had in one or two cases a maiden fancy that love might be possible.

That inspiration had passed her by in every case until she had encountered Michael

Hawthorne. Little by little he had gained a place in her esteem, and little by little the ardour of his evident adoration had warmed her own heart. She was not a girl to be lightly won, and Hawthorne had been openly her servant and suitor, with her father's full knowledge and consent, for somewhat more than two years. Little by little an esteem for his character had grown upon her; little by little came love, and now he was fairly rooted in her heart. That he should be in danger and suffering for a disastrous accident which happened years before his birth was, to her mind, nothing more than an added reason for loving him. That she should cast him over, and do it at the very hour when undeserved shame fell upon him, was to her thinking a treason base beyond common baseness. She would not dream of it. It seemed intolerable and shameful that a course which looked so vile to her own eyes should be urged upon her by her father. She made for him such an allowance as she could. She

knew, to begin with, that he did not appreciate the strength of her own feelings; his words had revealed as much.

‘You accept this man,’ so the General had said in effect, ‘for the common reasons: he is well-bred, well-to-do, and not ill-looking.’ But when love takes real root and flourishes to its own royal flower, it takes little account of those material things; and if Hawthorne had been stripped of health and reputation, and been struck halt and blind, her heart would only have called out the more urgently in his favour. To leave him now—impossible, intolerable! But, after all, the old father, who had been unfailingly kind, tugged at her heartstrings too. She was bitterly sorry to grieve him, but yet nursed against him some unreasonable scorn for not understanding without words what she dare not herself reveal. It was a heart-breaking pity to have quarrelled with him, it was a pity to give him pain, but she would not have deserted the man who held her plighted word

and owned her heart for a wilderness of fathers.

A brief walk brought her to the Grampians, where she sent in her card to Mrs. Barton and awaited, with a good deal of natural but well-concealed tremor, the interview before her. The two had met already, but on very distant terms, and each with ignorance of the other's character; but when Mary entered, handsome, matronly, and solicitous, the girl's heart went out to her instantly. She held out both hands in an unaccustomed gush of cordiality, and the elder woman accepted them with a tentative and half-answered inquiry.

'I have heard strange news to-day, Mrs. Barton,' said the girl. 'You know of it?'

'Yes,' said Mary; 'Mr. Barton has told me everything.'

'I thought it best to come to see you,' said Clara. 'The news has disturbed and agitated my father greatly. He and I have quarrelled. I am very sorry for that.'

‘And so am I,’ said Mary, ‘very sorry. Won’t you sit down, my dear?’

The caressing words came quite naturally, for the girl’s face beamed with feeling, and the pressure of her little gloved hands meant loyalty. Clara obeyed her, and Mrs. Barton drew a chair close to hers and sat beside her.

‘It is a serious thing, my dear,’ she went on. ‘It is a very grave and serious thing, indeed. You know all about it already, and I can talk to you quite freely. Your father believes to this day that my husband shot him.’

This was news, and dreadful news. No intimation of that fact had yet reached Clara’s ears, and at first it staggered her.

‘My father?’ she said. ‘Your husband—Mr. Hawthorne’s father?’

‘Didn’t they tell you that?’ asked Mary.

‘No.’

‘The trouble would have been bad enough,’ Mrs. Barton said, ‘in any case, but that’s what makes the worst of it.’ She told

the tale as she believed it—nay, as she knew it—and since her own devotion and her own heroism, could not fail to look out signally and candidly through every line of the narrative, the girl was crying on her shoulder for sheer pity and affection before it was barely told.

‘My dear,’ said Mrs. Barton, ‘you have a hard time before you, but it won’t matter much, if you and your husband are fond of each other, and determined to make the best of things. When I married, Tom was going to be tried. We never dreamed, either of us, that any judge or jury would be so stupid as to find him guilty ; but they did, and I had to follow him into a foreign land. I’ve never been sorry for it for a day. Love makes up for a lot, my dear. It makes up for more than you can dream of till you try it. Don’t you be afraid, if you’re sure of your own heart and sure of Michael’s. That’s the thing to look to. It’s a dreadful matter to defy a father, and I should be loath to counsel it.

I should never ask you to do it, but I should never advise any girl to turn her back upon her sweetheart, when once she is sure of him, and sure of her own feelings.'

'Is he here?' asked Clara. 'Is he in the house?'

'Yes,' my dear, 'he's in his own room. He's very sad and down-hearted, I'm afraid. Shall I let him know you're here?'

'No, no,' the girl answered, a sudden vivid earnestness breaking through her gaze. 'I told my father I was coming to call on you: I should be breaking my word if I saw him now. But my father understood that I came here to tell you everything. You may tell him from me, that it will be better and easier for us both not to meet until I give him word. But you may tell him, too, that I shall never alter, and that I shall never go back from my word.'

Mary Barton, in spite of all the years of prosperity she had known, was not a lady in all her outward fashions even yet, but she

had all the essentials of true ladyhood, which after all, perhaps, means very little more than real womanliness, and one sterling nature recognised the other instantly. Clara was as much at home with her, and found it as easy to lay bare her mind, as if she had known her for half a lifetime. She was Michael Hawthorne's mother, and for his sake had made the greatest sacrifice it was possible even for a mother to offer—that alone would have given her an easy title to the girl's affection. But it was impossible to look at the sweet, matronly face, and to listen to the honest, gentle voice of the good creature, without immediate and complete belief in her.

‘That's right, dear,’ Mary answered, ‘quite right. Michael will understand. I shall tell him all you have told me, and he will be quite patient and quite happy. I haven't known him as a mother ought to,’ she continued, with an unsteady voice, ‘but I think he's a good man, my dear. His

father is, I know. You mustn't think, my dear, because that old shame rests on us that he isn't as honourable and high-minded a man as you ever knew. He's the best man I ever came across ; and if Michael only makes you half as good a husband, you'll never be sorry that you were true to him.'

Michael Hawthorne and Tom Barton were naturally very far asunder in the girl's mind, and it would say little for her perceptions if she had not recognised the difference, but she was willing and even eager to believe well of Barton for Hawthorne's sake, and she accepted unquestioningly every word of praise his wife accorded him.

'We understand each other, Mrs. Barton, perfectly,' she said.

'Yes, dear,' Mary responded, 'we understand each other perfectly.'

'I must do as little,' Clara declared, 'to anger or annoy my father as I can. He's bitterly opposed to the match ; but perhaps when he finds that I'm not to be shaken he'll

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reconcile himself to it. At all events, there can be no harm done by a little waiting. I shall be glad if you'll come and see me sometimes ; but you must ask Mr. Hawthorne, for my sake, not to try and see me until I give him leave.'

'My dear,' cried Mary, embracing her with all her heart, 'you can be sure of Michael. He'll wait, I know, if he has to wait a year.'

On that understanding, and with such a knowledge of each other as people rarely gain in a single interview, they parted.

Clara walked home alone, and Mrs. Barton ran upstairs to carry the glad tidings of her unbroken allegiance to Hawthorne.

CHAPTER XXXII

ON the following morning the Count von Herder and Mr. Whateley paid a visit to the bank together, and there the Count made over to his confederate a considerable portion of the sum demanded of him. He had contrived to demonstrate to Whateley the fact that a complete restitution would cripple him financially, and had saved for himself enough to go on with until either their novel scheme of roguery, or some other similar contrivance, should have been brought to a prosperous conclusion. The Count felt the process of denudation keenly, but contrived to conceal his sentiments on the point, and to comport himself in the presence of the bank officials with an air of flourishing jollity which im-

parted to a mere business transaction quite a glow of friendly feeling.

‘And now, Von H.,’ said Mr. Whateley, walking out with bank-book and cheque-book snugly tucked away in his breast-pocket, ‘I’ve got to go and see old Denton. He gave me an appointment for this morning.’

‘Confound him!’ the Count interjected.

‘So mote it be,’ said Mr. Whateley. ‘Confound him with all my heart; but I’ve got to see him all the same. I did a little bit of work last night, Von, and there’s time enough to go back to the hotel, and put it all in your hands.’

‘Come along,’ said the Count. ‘We shall catch the mail at Adelaide, if we can post the letter to-morrow. The sooner the thing’s done the better.’

‘Right you are, my pippin,’ responded Mr. Whateley, who experienced a regal glow of exultation every time he laid his hand upon his breast and felt the outline of the

bank-book and the cheque-book reposing in the inner pocket.

They swaggered back to the hotel together, each comporting himself at his regalest, and Mr. Whateley, having sought for the materials in his trunk, entered the Count's room with a locked cash-box in his hand.

'Now,' he said, unlocking the box, and speaking in a whisper, 'here's the letter to begin with that contains all the instructions, fair and square. The agent isn't likely to suspect anything, because, you see, the information's too particular; nobody but himself and the General are supposed to know the facts of the case. Here are the photographs'—he spread them about the table as he spoke—'of twenty letters, and you'll be able to cut out from amongst them every word I've used. There's a bottle of gum on your mantelpiece there, that I brought in first thing this morning. Here's a pair of scissors, and there you are, old chap.' He dug his companion in the ribs, with a little chuckle.

The Count smiled softly in response, waved his fat white hand in the air with a little gesture of burlesque salutation, and at once sat down to the table.

‘All right,’ he said, ‘co away and see your frient Mr. Denton. You needn’t, perhaps, carry him my compliments, pecause he may not altogether care to have them. Shoul’t he mention my name, you may fenture to offer him the sincerest sentiments of my regard.’

‘I shan’t do that, Von,’ Mr. Whateley answered. ‘But I’ll get off now, because I don’t want to put the old boy in an ill-temper by keeping him waiting. I’ll tell you what——’ he paused suddenly, with a countenance of gloom, and nodded twice or thrice.

‘Fery well,’ returned the Count, smiling gaily. ‘Tell me what?’

‘I’d a jolly sight rather you’d got to face old Denton than me,’ said Whateley. ‘You can’t fog old Denton.’

‘Can’t I?’ said the Count. ‘Why not?’

‘You may,’ returned Whateley. ‘I can’t. He’s one too many for me, and he knows a lot too much. I tell you, Von, he’s the longest head of the lot of us.’

‘You shoul’t make it a point,’ said the Count, sententiously, ‘nefer to be afraid of anypody.’

‘Oh, yes,’ returned Mr. Whateley, ‘you should make it a point to be nine feet high. It’s easy to talk, Von H.’

‘Fery well,’ said the Count. ‘I’ll go to vork ; see your Mr. Denton. He is not, I presume, a thumbscrew. He’ll get nothing out of you ?’

‘Not much, he won’t,’ returned Mr. Whateley. ‘You bet on that ; but he’ll try. I shall want a change when I come home, Von. He’ll put me in such a bath of perspiration, that I might as well have waded out into the harbour.’

‘Fery well,’ returned the Count ; ‘you should cultivate *sang-froid*, my friend ; whereas you haf onily cultivated an appearance of it.’

Mr. Whateley departed, and, by way of strengthening his nerves, took a sip of brandy at the bar. The Count meanwhile locked himself in, and devoted himself with a careful assiduity to the labour of the day. First of all, with every token of approval, he carefully and critically went over the letter supposed to be written by General Mallard to his agent. He admitted to himself that it was admirably expressed, and in all ways calculated to carry with it an air of reality.

‘Sir,—During my stay in the colonies I have learned that there are investments to be made here which, whilst considerably more profitable than any to be found in London, are at least equally safe. I have taken the advice of some of the best financial people, and have resolved to embark largely in colonial securities. You will, immediately on receipt of my letter, proceed to realise the following stock: Of Australian Silver Five per Cent., of which I hold 14,450*l.* 13*s.* 8*d.*,

according to your last memorandum ; Egyptian Four per Cent. Unified, 37,250*l.* 13*s.* 8*d.* ; French Three per Cent., 12,241*l.* ; Italian Five per Cent., 48,440*l.* ; Japanese Seven per Cent., 8,119*l.*

‘ You will observe that I am here quoting the value of the stock as expressed by you in the final memorandum received before my departure from England, and dated September the 1st. The total value of the stock at that moment was 120,501*l.* 7*s.* 4*d.* Should it happen that any serious fall in any one of the stocks has taken place by the time at which this letter reaches you, I shall be advised by the newspapers and shall wire you to hold or sell as I am advised. In any case the transaction is somewhat a large one, and as a precautionary measure I desire you to cable to me immediately on receipt of this letter the word “Received.” You may address me : “Mallard, Menzies’, Melbourne.” Do not act until you receive my reply, which will consist of the single word “Transfer.”

The mail which leaves to-day will arrive at Naples on the 17th of February, and on the 20th will be in London. My movements are at present somewhat uncertain, but I have made arrangements to be in Melbourne for two or three days at that time, and shall stay there at Menzies' Hotel. On receipt of my wire in answer to your own, you will realise, and will at once transfer the sum by cable to my credit at the Consolidated Colonial Bank in Melbourne.

‘ I am, sir,

‘ Your obedient servant,

‘ EDWARD STANLEY MALLARD.’

‘ If the facts and figures are gorrect,’ said the Count, smiling to himself, ‘ and I presume they are, he will be a fery clefer agent indeed who suspects this communigation.’

With the letter propped up against the decanter before him he proceeded to snip out of the photographed letters, which were all of the natural size, every word and figure for

the copy he was about to make. He gummed his fragments with great care and particularity on to three or four sheets of paper. General Mallard's handwriting was of a bold and flourishing type, and covered a good deal of ground. The Count had completed his task down to the very signature, when a knock sounded at the door. He swept his careful mosaic, the original letters and the clippings, under the bedclothes and unlocked the door, to find himself face to face with his confederate.

‘Well?’ he asked.

‘It's all right, old chap,’ returned Mr. Whateley, removing his hat, and puffing upward with a projecting under-lip at his heated face. ‘But it's just been as I told you. I've had about as nice a three-quarters of an hour as I ever knew in all my life. That old chap is a demon. I've been under cross-examination before to-day, but I never had such a time of it.’

Mr. Whateley had already closed the door,

and now he sat down, and whispered with his lips at Von Herder's very ear—

‘He's made up his mind, Von H.—mind you, he's quite sure about it—that you and I were in that Browning business together. He's as certain of it as if he'd seen us at it.’

‘Is he?’ said the Count, closing his eyes and peering scornfully over his shoulder into his companion's face.

‘By George, he is,’ returned Whateley, ‘and so I tell you. Make no mistake about it, Von, he's on the trail, and if it was ever worth his while he'd go for us. He fairly frightened me, I tell you. I've had such a twister as I haven't had these three years.’

‘What dit you tell him?’ the Count asked.

‘I told him nothing,’ Whateley answered. ‘I stuck him out point-blank that he was wrong; I told him it was a point of honour. He laughed at that, grinned all over, the old Cheshire cat; but I made him see I wouldn't tell, and I swore to him,

through thick and thin, that you had no more to do with the affair than he had. Of course, I told him I was in it, and in it up to the neck ; but the Count Von Herder, said I, may be just as shady as he likes, but he had got nothing to do with that job. I swore to it on my word of honour.'

'Yes,' said the Count with excessive dryness, 'and what did he think about your word of honour?'

'Well, to tell you the truth, Von,' said Mr. Whateley, 'he didn't seem to think much more about mine than I should think of yours.'

He was a little nettled by the inquiry, for it is a curious and noticeable fact that of however little value a man's word of honour may be, he does not care to have it depreciated from outside. Mr. Whateley was in the act of confessing that he had lied with a complete effrontery in Von Herder's defence, and it seemed to him ungrateful, and even monstrous, that Von Herder should depreciate

his reputation for truthfulness at such a moment.

‘Fery well,’ said the Count. ‘Fery well. It is not fery profitable to tiscuss that question, and I am in the humour for vork. Have you locked the toor?’

‘Yes,’ said Whateley, ‘that’s all right. You don’t mind my smoking?’

‘Not at all,’ the Count responded. ‘Smoke away, but don’t disturb me. I want to catch to-morrow’s mail, and the first attempt may not succeet.’

He had provided himself with a great sheath of pens and pen-holders of every size and quality, and he began to search amongst these, trying the nibs of many on his thumb nail and holding them up to the light to scrutinise them with a look of professional accuracy. He chose one at last and made a start: threw it aside after a moment’s trial, and took another, with a new sheet of paper. He had before him a quire of the letter-paper of the Union Club. He made two or three

false starts, but at last, suited to his own satisfaction, he got to work in earnest.

Whateley, lighting a cigarette, set his heels on a chair in front of him and balanced himself lightly in his own, sending out slow puffs of smoke through his nostrils, and watching the busy Von Herder with an unfailing interest. The Count squared his shoulders to the task, and his forehead and the little bald spot on the top of his head perspired. Sometimes he consulted the mosaic page before him through a big monocle, and then he turned aside from the sheet on which he was writing to imitate a word before him over and over again until he was certain of the surety of his own hand, and finally put it in its place. A certain peculiarity in the '£' employed by the General cost him a good deal of trouble. He drew it with a painful care, examined microscopically the original and his reproduction of it: drew it with a freer hand, dashed it off at a flourish, and repeated it many times

until he was sure that he had mastered it. Finally, after an hour and a half of unremitted labour, he pushed the patched original and his copy of it across the table, and rose with a leonine yawn and stretched both arms high in the air. Whateley took the two documents, one in either hand, and with a puff expelled the cigarette he held between his lips into the fire-grate. He made a long and careful comparison of the two, and little by little a smile crept from his lips to his eyes, and illumined his whole countenance.

‘I say, Von H., there’s no mistake about it, you’re the king of the crowd of them. It’s worth while to travel from London to Sydney to look at a piece of work like this. Credit where credit’s due, Von H. You’re the king of the crowd. It’s perfect; now let’s have the envelope.’

‘I’ll take a little rest first, my yonk frient,’ returned the Count. ‘This kind of think, though it must pe confessed that it yielts an excellent return for lapour, is still laporious.

My eyes, my hand, my back, are all aching. Give me a cigarette.'

Whateley offered him a silver case, which he accepted with his common burlesque flourish of politeness, and extracting a cigarette from it he struck a match on the under part of the marble mantelpiece, and threw himself into the arm-chair with a shock which made the whole room quiver.

'I think,' he said, 'that it will to. Hant them poth over. Give me the monocle; let me be quite sure.'

Lounging back in his arm-chair with an air of complete fatigue after labour, he compared them side by side, and occasionally nodded to express his own satisfaction. Finally he arose and laid them on the table.

'That will to,' he said. 'That will to very nicely inteet. Now,' he added, 'I will take a class of wine, and then I will write the attress; then we will take a little mouthful of something to eat, and you shall walk down to the post-office and rechister this.'

‘I notice, Von,’ said Mr. Whateley, ‘that you contrive to keep yourself pretty clear.’

‘Oh, yes,’ returned the Count, smiling, ‘I do that. But, my tear yonk frient, there is no risk ; you will simply rechister a letter to E. Roston, Esq., of Ely Place, from Smith or Williamson or Jones of Sytney. Your name is not known at the post-office.’

‘Oh, all right,’ said Whateley. ‘I don’t grumble, only I notice that you don’t run into danger, Von.’

‘I nefer do,’ the Count responded. ‘There are two rules in life, my dear yonk frient, the which you would do well to ponder. Never get into tanger if you can help it ; when you are in tanger never be afrait. I have followed those rules all my life, and have found opedience to them useful in more ways than I could tescrive to you in a minute. Weigh them, my tear yonk frient ; observe them, you will find them of falue to you ; they include, believe me, the experiences of a life which has not been altogether vasted.’

The Count's programme was carried out in its entirety. The pint of champagne was called for and consumed. This done, and the Count's cigarette smoked out, he sat down once more at the table, and, after half a dozen attempts in practice, produced a facsimile of General Mallard's address to his agent so striking that the writer of the original would have been compelled to acknowledge its accuracy.

Mr. Whateley, with renewed expressions of admiration for his companion's talent, himself enveloped the letter and placed it carefully in the inner pocket of his coat, and accompanied the Count to lunch. First of all, however, ever scrap of paper which had been employed in the wicked imitation was carefully burned and reduced to actual powder. When the last red spark had died out in the grate, the Count took up the hearth-brush which stood beside the mantelpiece and scattered the feathery calcined contents of the grate until a mere sooty dust was left.

‘And now,’ he said, ‘we will haf luncheon, and you can take your letter to the post. Don’t neclect to rechister it. The risk is nothing, and we must make as certain as possible of its arrival.’

To this Mr. Whateley assented, and they descended together to the coffee-room, where they partook of the best the house provided. The room was fairly full, and there were one or two people there who were already known to the Count. He recognised them all with his unfailing and cheerful foreign affability, and charmed many of them, who thought him a distinguished personage.

Mr. Whateley went out to discharge his commission, and the Count, in the shade of the verandah, smoked his cigarette and sipped his coffee as he looked on the street, drowned in the half tropic sunshine.

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME

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